

*By the same author :*

THE TOWER OF  
PURITY

# **BLUE SKY BEYOND**

**THE STORY OF AN EVACUEE**

**BY**

**J. H. ACOTT**

**BOMBAY**

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It is some time now since John Everett Traill, a fairly close friend of mine, sent me the brief story of a short passage of his life. He told me he felt he was going to die as he deserved to die and he did not know what to do with the manuscript. "Therefore," he wrote, "I send it to you, Joe. Maybe some day, some place, you will meet the people I write about. I have used their real names. I have mentioned real places. Maybe, too, they will agree to write that portion of their experiences which link up with mine. It should make an interesting story. Maybe you'll be able to make some money from the book. Maybe you won't. If you are as unlucky a writer as I know you to be, you won't!"

We knew each other fairly well—in Batavia. How I met his friend Susan Mannering and how, strangely enough, I discovered she had the stories of Gerald Portland and Mark Sheridan, was merely coincidence—or Fate—have it as you will.

I present to you what Traill hoped we might one day present. Each story is unaltered but for the passages which overlap unnecessarily. These have been vetted so as to get the correct link up.

J. H. A.

When a girl's sixteen, and as poor as she's pretty,  
And she hasn't a friend and she hasn't a home,  
Heigh-ho ! She's as safe in Paris city  
As a lamb night strayed where the wild wolves roam ;  
And that was I ; oh it's seven years now  
(Some water's run down the Seine since then),  
And I've almost forgotten the pangs and the tears now,  
And I've almost taken the measure of men.

(“Cocotte” by ROBERT W. SERVICE).

- P A R T I.....THE STORY OF JOHN TRAILL.  
P A R T II.....THE STORY OF GERALD PORTLAND.  
P A R T III.....THE STORY OF MARK SHERIDAN.  
P A R T IV.....THE STORY OF SUSAN MANNERING.

*All the characters and incidents in this book, except one or two actual happenings in this war, are entirely fictitious and imaginary. No reference to any living person is intended or should be assumed.*

**It may make a difference to all eternity  
whether we do right or wrong today.**

**JAMES FREEMAN CLARK.**

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*Part One: The Story of John Traill*

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## CHAPTER I

It was Sheridan who first drew our attention to her where she sat half hidden by one of the smoothly painted green pillars. Sheridan's sardonic features assumed a suggestive leer as he spoke. He is a quaint combination of numerous shoddy qualities and extremely rare virtues.

"I wouldn't mind owning her, lock stock and barrel," he said crudely in his sneering voice, flicking the ash from his cigarette into an ash tray with a slow deliberate motion. The hot ash hissed as it struck the water. Then the band struck up another tune and even the sterterous sound of Portland's breathing was drowned.

Sheridan's coarse eulogy, so frankly a condensation in words of the secret thoughts of many a normal male when he looks at a desirable woman, drew a startled look from a fat lady in silver sequins at the next table. Her eyes started from her head and she dropped some mayonnaise on the bosom of her expensive looking dress. She hurriedly looked down again at her grotesquely piled plate, the resigned expression of her waiter speaking volumes for his intimate knowledge of her capacity for comestibles.

Portland came out of his trance, waving a fat hairy hand, his slightly bulbous eyes heavy lidded. His red sensual lips were moist. I hate his sweating body but his strange mind fascinates me, much, I suppose, and to put it tritely, as a snake fascinates a frog. He and Sheridan are such vivid contrasts physically and yet so close mentally, wrapped together in a sensuous blanket of fleshly materialism. The one lean and tanned and cynical, with steel grey eyes that have seen much and seem never to admit that their owner is never satiated with the thrills and eroticism existing in the underworld of human feelings. The other fat and gross and ruthless in the pursuit of satisfaction for his constantly sweating body and miserable soul.

But why should I lash these two with my pen? I looked at the woman indicated and felt no small quickening of my own evil pulse. To use the time honoured phrase of your popular novelist, she was perfectly lovely. Never, in my thirty-two years of twisted life, have I seen anyone so unusually beautiful. The creations of the greatest artists were as lifeless, bloodless putty in comparison. Or so I thought. Perhaps my judgment is somewhat warped.

"You should control yourself Sheridan," I said. "You're shocking the morals of Bombay." I admit I spoke half seriously.

"I don't mind betting Bombay's got no morals. In my opinion only a minute percentage of any town, especially a big one, has real morals. Some of us are just frankly brutal. Some keep all the nasty stuff for when the lights go out and the fellow next door starts snoring."

The fat lady dropped a pepper pot.

"You're too cynical old boy," puffed Portland, pulling at his full lower lip, his eyes still on the woman. "I say, why don't we make her acquaintance? She seems lonely enough. They shouldn't allow lone females into the Hotel. Tempts one terribly—to put it alliteratively."

There was a snort from the fat lady in silver. This was apparently too much for her. She hissed suddenly across at Portland, malevolence in every accent, her pale blue eyes flashing.

"You should try and learn the elements of decency and a few manners sir! Or at least modify the tone of your voice. It might be a good idea if someone threw you out."

Portland rose heavily and bowed to her in silence amidst the amused glances of those within earshot. Then he made his way between the tables towards the object of our admiration. Sheridan and I got up hurriedly and followed him.

There was a smile on the woman's face as she replied to Portland's question. And there was something hidden in her dark eyes that made me feel uncomfortable. I recalled the sensation I used to experience in the early days of the war when I began to see uniforms surround me. Shame mixed with envy of a better type than I.

"No," she said. "Do sit down, all of you. Yes, I must confess I am lonely too. Bombay can be quite frightening under certain conditions."

Her voice was low, with a sort of mellow note to it. A tuneful sound. I saw the bitterly lascivious light in Sheridan's eyes, the surcharged vein that throbbed at his

temple whenever he was excited. Portland's heavy lidded green orbs were expressionless. But his red tongue appeared for a brief second beneath his small black moustache as it licked his lips. We all sat down and for a moment or two were silent, listening to the music. A waiter hovered around.

I took in the woman's thin, transparent looking beauty, taking advantage of her interest in the dancing couples. Her complexion was slightly sallow, reminiscent of illness. Her eyes, "dark pools" as your more sentimental novelist might be tempted to describe them, held fitting shadows of obvious suffering. Considering the number of refugees pouring into every Indian town from Singapore, Malaya and Burma I guessed that she was one of their number. There was something about them that one could hardly mistake. The slightly slanting eyes and high cheekbones hinted at a strain of Burmese blood. But I may have been mistaken. I never found out. The lovely, somewhat full red lips looked soft and sensitive. The black evening dress she wore accentuated a striking figure when she got up to dance with Sheridan.

"What do you think old boy?" snuffled Portland as we watched them weave their way through the shuffling, perspiring maze of people on the dance floor.

"I think we're three of the world's most highly coloured villains," I replied and felt a little sick. I remember feeling like that sometimes as a youngster when people would glance at my twisted right leg and let the pity spring to their eyes.

Portland chuckled. He is often amused at some of my statements. The band jerked on through a rhumba. A sea of khaki, white and smoke blue uniforms undulated over the dance floor, its martial austerness alleviated by the gay caparisons of the women, who laughed and talked and threw their heads back in apparent gay abandon, their hearts, I doubted not, heavy with the horror of anticipating the day when lover, husband and brother would be dancing in heaven—or hell. Maniac Hitler certainly had a lot to answer for. But then, come to that, so had every man and woman.

Outside, Bombay's harbour must have been black and sinister, or perhaps ghostly under a first quarter moon, distrustful of even the smallest stern light, distrustful, perhaps, of the very stars overhead lest they be not stars but the navigation lights of Japanese bombers from some aircraft carrier slouching off the coast. Over three hundred craft, large and small, packed the docks and harbour. Admirable target. Admirable mankind that made this sort of thing necessary. Mankind, with its palavering politicians, raving maniac dictators and those miserably unimportant cogs—the men and women in the street. The only possible benefits that loomed

on the war torn horizon were the extinction of the old school tie, the cessation of the placing of power within the senile hands of doddering incompetents and the silencing of the heartless joviality of your true capitalistic money grubber.

I realised suddenly, as Sheridan brought the woman back to the table and the band recessed for refreshments, that my thoughts had been getting the better of me. Perhaps it was my twisted leg that was responsible. Perhaps just the inherent evil of my soul.

"I'm afraid we're all rather bad mannered," oozed Portland, an ingratiating smile on his fat face. "Here we sit, having intruded ourselves on you, and we haven't even troubled to introduce ourselves."

"One doesn't seem to bother about that these days, does one?" Her smile was quick and fleeting, like a bright coloured bird winging its way across a patch of grey sky.

The waiter still hovered around us. Sheridan ordered drinks.

"Have you eaten?" he asked the woman. She nodded, with, I thought, a furtive glance after the departing waiter. Trying to interpret that glance, I wondered a trifle unkindly what she saw in us—Portland fat and moist—Sheridan lean and sardonic, with his Eric von Stroheim type of head, flattish at the back and scarred on the left of the scalp, but handsome nevertheless—myself twisted and ugly. A grotesque group indeed for any woman to keep company with willingly, even if they had not been perfect strangers to her. Perhaps the flashy diamond ring on Portland's finger attracted her. Or Sheridan's exquisitely cut grey suit. Or the very horror of my countenance.

"What is *your* name?" I asked her suddenly.

"Does it matter?" There was a wistful twist to her red lips. I wondered if it did matter. These days people met and talked and romanced and parted and hated each other. And the world went on slaughtering itself into extinction just the same, without bothering about any names except those that filled a certain roll of honour.

"We'd like to know," persisted Portland, rubbing his hands together.

"After all, we're going to see more of you, aren't we?" inserted Sheridan smoothly. She laughed, a low, thoroughly delightful laugh.

"My name is Mannerling. Susan Mannerling. I'm an evacuee, from Malaya."

Portland took it upon himself to introduce us. Just then the waiter returned with the drinks. We drank to the end of the war. To the restoration of law and order and of property. And as we drank our eyes were on the lovely face of the woman we had met so deliberately.

When at last we all suggested going, it was midnight. Portland showed signs of restlessness. I knew he feared that we should lose trace of the girl. I think we all felt the same. I paid the bill. We rose to go. The woman seemed paler than she had at first been as she reached slim fingers for her small black bag and began to walk away with us.

"Just a moment madam," said the waiter politely. "You've forgotten to pay your bill. Dinner and half a bottle of champagne."

She stopped short. Then smiled gently, composedly.

"Good heavens! So I have."

"You put the bill in your bag, I think," said the waiter.

She opened her bag.

"So I did! I must be getting absent-minded."

There was something about that moment that will live for a long time in my memory. I had read about such predicaments. But I had never witnessed one first hand. Sheridan was a fraction of a second before me. He grabbed the bill from her.

"No woman pays a bill while I'm around," he said in his most gallant manner, a manner that yet held a sneer beneath its surface. No, I thought, but they paid just the same.

We made our way slowly from the smoky room, out into the passage way to the lift. Downstairs, in the semi moonlit gloom of the porch we all stood for a while motionless, temporarily at a loss for speech. The Pathan commissionnaire whistled for Portland's car.

"Where do you live?" asked Sheridan of our new acquaintance. "Perhaps we might meet again—say for lunch tomorrow?"

I thought there was an obvious note of relief in her voice as she answered.

"You are very kind, all of you. Yes, I'd love lunch. I'm putting up in a flat on Marine Drive. Soon a Mahal I think, its called, the building I mean."

I raised my eyebrows. Portland coughed thickly. And Sheridan whistled softly, passing it off quickly by pretending to whistle an air. We knew that the rents of this particular

building were in proportion with its excellent outlook and modern equipment. If she couldn't pay for a meal.....

"We'll drive you there at once," said Portland cheerily, interrupting our thoughts. "Don't you worry at all, my dear."

I don't know if she caught the proprietary inflection of his tone. His large blue Buick rolled up. I could never fathom where he got the extra petrol coupons for it. We all bundled in and he pressed the self starter. Sheridan suggested driving round by Arthur Bunder and the Gateway of India for a breath of the sea. A dull moon shone leadenly on a leaden looking sea. We could make out the dark hulks of ships in the harbour, quite close in. Somewhere near the docks a solitary siren boomed across the water for a brief second. The woman at my side suddenly quoted from Service :

"And so when the war will be over,  
We'll seek for the Wonderful One ;  
And maiden will look for her lover,  
And mother will look for her son ;  
And there will be end to our grieving.  
And gladness will gleam over loss,  
As, glory beyond all believing !  
We point—to a name on a cross."

As her low beautiful voice stopped I was acutely aware of one thing. I had never felt so uncomfortable in my bitter, unhappy life.

## CHAPTER II

"She's obviously out for easy money," said Sheridan next morning at the breakfast table. The very manner in which he helped himself to marmalade was intolerantly cynical. "Marmalade!" snorted his bearing, "pshaw! What filth! But I might as well eat it, even if it's only to get rid of it."

Sometimes I get a little tired of Sheridan and feel that I would like to cut his throat with my *kris* as I did with a half breed labourer in Batavia a year ago. But the labourer was a stranger and no one will ever know I murdered him. Sheridan is different. We have known each other for nearly four years. Portland he and I have roamed India together, a sort of Three Musketeers—from the nether regions if you like. Why we have kept together God—or perhaps Satan—knows. For I'm sure we hate each other under our outward show of friendliness. I know I hate both of them. I've hated them practically ever since I met them at Rangoon. Sheridan and Portland themselves had met, apparently, at Saigon. It is hard to explain why we have done certain things. It is impossible to describe them in print. Having some small gift for this admirable pastime I have often wanted to write in full about ourselves. But the reason why I have not done so must be obvious.

I helped myself to coffee and looked out of the window at the sweep of Marine Drive. The view from Malabar Hill is superb.

"Every woman you see who is not a cripple or over sixty inspires you with the desire for seduction," I said quietly. He laughed loudly and bit deeply into a slice of toast and marmalade.

"Lend an ear to our newly converted angel of goodness," he sneered to the ceiling.

"Don't forget it was Portland who barged in on her," I went on. I must confess I felt somewhat sheepish at the angle I was taking.

"My dear chap, it's quite plain to see that you're not being noble but have some idea of getting her to your own nasty, scheming self! I'm surprised at you! Of course Portland barged in on her—and of course she was sitting there like some pathetic morsel of humanity, just waiting for someone like him—or just like us, anyway."

I could not deny the fact that it was strange for a woman, even in so unorthodox a time as war time, to fall in so easily and smoothly with strange company. I could not deny my own suspicions about her. I could not deny my own twisted desire for her. I can only say, in partial self defence, miserably insufficient as it may seem, that when one's soul is ugly, when one's body is cursed, one finds one's self-coveting many things which are beautiful—things which do not relate only to the flesh.

"You don't know your women," went on Sheridan. "Or at least you appear not to know them. Especially your women in war time. If they're not trying to grab themselves week-end husbands and companions for their trips to the hills while their husbands sweat on the battlefield they're evacuees willing to sell their souls for sustenance."

"We've never really needed sustenance, have we!" I asked. "So we don't know what demands the experience places on the human mind—especially the feminine mind."

"Oh for God's sake shut up, Traill. You make me sick. Really you do. Talk about whitened sepulchres and sickly sentiment!"

I could definitely have killed him then. But I knew he spoke the truth in a way. I was cloaking my natural desires beneath a quality that was pseudo genuine. I felt no real pity for the woman.

"Where's Portland?" I asked, leaving the subject. He waved a hand airily.

"Gone to present our Susan with a bunch of flowers or some such tripe. Last seen making a beeline for Marlane's the florist, chivalry written all over his fat face and body but a nasty gleam in his eye. I'm very much afraid he'll steal a march on us, my friend."

His steel grey eyes flickered amusedly over my twisted leg and then at my unprepossessing features.

"He was up bright and early—even before the fishermen cast their first nets. If you had heard him whistling you would have thought he actually had a soul. By the way, you going to the races this afternoon?"

I nodded absently. I was thinking of Portland whistling. Portland, who had recently opened the "Evacuees' Employment Bureau" as a sort of sideline and sister business to his chain of restaurants.

\* \* \*

### A word about ourselves.

Portland was not as elderly as he looked. A slightly diseased heart had kept him out of the clutches of the National Service Act. The story of his flight from the paralysing grip of military service was rather amusing.

When war broke out he was offered a commission. He refused it airily, saying that he was doing more valuable work where he was and making more money anyway. That was towards the close of 1939.

In 1940 the National Service Act set things moving for Mr. Gerald Portland. He was called up for service. He promptly disappeared from Bombay, telling us to address any letters back to senders superscribed "addressee left." He reappeared after six months, slightly camouflaged. His blissful state of liberation existed for about a year. Then eventually a spiteful acquaintance brought about his downfall. The authorities, having traced him again, proceeded to tell him in no uncertain manner that he had had his chance of a commission in His Majesty's Land Forces—and lost it. He would now be conscripted as a private in those same forces.

I will never forget the look on Portland's face the day he told me of his fate.

"They can't do this to me," he had snorted indignantly. "Good God!—a man going from the Managing Directorship of the Portland Blues to a post carrying a salary of about fifty rupees!"

"Oh yes, they can do it to you!" I had replied maliciously. "This is war my lad. All sorts of queer things can happen. Even the sight of you in a private's uniform. Never mind, they'll make a man of you!"

Came the dread moment of his interview with the District Commander. Apparently the red tabs impressed Portland so much that he was practically speechless all through the slanging he received.

Then came that agonisingly doubtful procedure—the medical officer's examination. It was ironic to think that poor Portland's months of mental agony and final despair should end in sudden hysterical joy at finding himself unfit for military service.

My release from obligations to my country in the military line was less harrying than Portland's.....and had been in no way due to my mother's golden charm which I wore round my neck. One glance at my twisted right leg had been enough for the medical authorities. I was permitted to pursue my literary vocation, being told that later perhaps they would try and fit me into the Propaganda and Public Relations Department. Knowing the peculiar flair Government had for using one in anything but what one was suited for I was not surprised when months went by without any fitting in at all, of any kind.

Sheridan enjoyed the doubtful benefits of freedom because of the fact that he was in a key position. As Managing Director of Advertising Advice and Service he was considered indispensable to the nation's effort. Government propaganda schemes had to be prepared. India had to be constantly reminded that this struggle was a struggle to the finish. So Sheridan, brilliant advertiser and artist, helped the nation out according to his lights. The three of us lived together in a big luxurious flat on Malabar Hill.

There you have a very brief picture of three specimens of a low type of human being. I take the liberty of supposing, however, that you have not yet fully realised the extent of our lowness. I think you would have to actually know us and live with us to gauge that.

It was eleven o'clock before Portland showed up. I supposed he had gone on to his main office on Hornby Road after having presented Susan Mannering with his idiotic flowers. He was in a good mood. He grinned his peculiarly wolfish grin. The four front teeth of his upper jaw were short and level and the two bounding them were fangs in the true sense of the word. I felt a strong desire to bring some heavy weight down on the rolls of fat at the base of his bullet skull. I was reading "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" for the fifth time and as I laid it down Portland spoke cheerily.

"She's coming to the races with me," he said.

"That's nice for all of us," I returned. "We're all going. Sheridan says he'll be back early from office."

Portland's expression was as cheerful as ever as he slumped obesey into a chair and stretched fat legs before him. His face looked greasy and revolting.

"I hope we pick out a few winners for her," he said dreamily. "Do you know, Traill, she hasn't a bean. And practically no clothes. Even that dress she had on last night was a gift at one of these evacuee camps. I feel terribly sorry for her."

In spite of my own character I could not help but squirm at his confounded hypocrisy. There was a lascivious look in his heavy lidded eyes.

"I'm thinking of giving her a job," he went on, hitching his damp looking trousers further over his knees.

"Through your Evacuees' Employment Bureau?" I asked coldly. "Do you think she'll take it? She looks a decent woman to me, Portland."

He rubbed his thick hands together slowly.

"Oh, actually I wouldn't dream of offering her a job like that until the state of my financial resources—at the state of my mind prevented me from looking after her any longer."

I was silent for a moment as I took in the revolting picture he made. The blood was burning through my veins. When I did speak the calmness of my tone almost surprised me.

"Have you ever realised what a swine you are, Portland?" I asked. He chuckled.

"Good lord—of course not! How can anyone be a swine when he helps poor helpless females to live? If it wasn't for me, Traill, there would be dozens more girls on the street, rotten with disease, starving, their souls dry within them. I give them comfortable homes and honest jobs. Some of them even get married."

"Honest jobs?" I said quietly. "And at what a price, eh?"

"My dear chap, my girls have just as important a national job to do as any of your services. They meet officers and men tired of fighting, tired of the stench of death. And they show them how to forget. They dance with them, show them the town, how to live. If they choose to fall in love, however briefly, or make their own ways of entertainment, it is no business of mine."

"Of course not. They merely pay you a commission for the rest of their lives—for having saved their lives—having saved them from starvation."

"Exactly—or almost. You see, it's rather difficult to keep trace of those that get married. So they usually pay me a lump sum in gratitude. A sort of gratuity."

"Forced from them by your gently blackmailing soul!" I snarled suddenly, deserted by my usually thin powers of self control. I am always bitter, always evil tempered, and sometimes find my temper on the verge of forcing me to extreme physical violence.

"Tut, tut, Traill! Calm yourself. What is wrong with you anyway? Isn't it kinder to let a girl pay a nominal sum for her happiness than let her be unhappy?"

He spoke so blandly, so completely in possession of himself that it acted like a cold douche to my strange anger. A month ago, I must admit, I would have merely spat at Portland's sentiments and the thought of his unfortunate victims. Or were they so unfortunate after all? Was my present championing mood but a fantastic figment of my imagination, a sort of dream within a dream? Wasn't what Portland said true? Life was so queer, human nature so complex. Show a woman you are an angel and she will despise you. Show her you are a beast and she will hate you. Ignore her and she will pursue you only to heap contempt and contumely on you when she has got you.

Perhaps Marianne had done much to augment the destructive forces engendered within me by my twisted right leg. But then it cannot be easy for a girl to love such as I. Least of all Marianne, who was like a flower. I can still see her where I threw her, the marks of my thumbs on her white throat, her poor violet eyes staring.

She said she was sorry for me. Said she could not love me. Said she had tried so hard to love me. Yes, I loved Marianne deeply. It was just as well no one ever knew I killed her. I am sure it would have hurt her sensitive spirit, if spirits there be, to see me hanging by the neck till I was dead.

But what made me think of Marianne? Was I falling in love with Susan Mannering? I shivered.

### CHAPTER III

THE desire to get Susan away from the others that night got the better of me. The races had been a success. For once Mahaluxmi had smiled even on me. It seemed an anti-climax, after the cheerful afternoon and Susan's gay laugh as she picked winner after winner, to sit and stare at prancing couples in any dance hall. Dancing is an inane pastime, anyway. I detest it.

"But won't your friends be offended?" she asked when I quietly put the idea to her while Portland and Sheridan were bathing and changing. I had suggested a trip out to Juhu, away from the smoke and grime of the city.

"Nonsense!" I said emphatically. "Why, they'd love to think you had been having a bit of a change!"

She looked at me quizzically over her tea cup for a moment and then smiled.

"You three are such dears," she said. "I think I'm very, very lucky to have met you."

Was there any note of coquettishness in her voice or a spark of it in her expression? It seemed that there wasn't. And yet with a woman it is hard to say. I thought of some of the greatest female actresses of all time, from Eve to Cleopatra and Delilah.

"Well?" I insisted. "What do you say? We could get away now. There's no need to change, at least where I'm concerned. You could dash out of your racing kit in a second or two I'm sure."

Her face was alright now.

"Yes—and we could take our swimming costumes and . . . ."

She stopped suddenly, obviously aghast at her thoughtlessness. I did not miss the swift glance she cast at my right leg. There's something about a leg that is twisted from the hip that must be really revolting. Next second she smiled again.

"Forgive me, do. I—I'm afraid....."

"Don't be silly," I said curtly. "I'll watch you swim anyway—in the moonlight. It's a little fuller tonight."

"Nonsense," she said as she rose and gathered her bag. "We'll sit under the palms and talk of cabbages and kings. I'd probably drown anyway if I swam alone—I'm not so good at it."

My old car bumped and rattled us over the fourteen odd miles out to Juhu fairly swiftly. The blacked out roads were not so depressing as they would have been without the pale gleam of a half moon, a gleam that can be like death itself or the first pulsing romantic beats of life—according to one's mood. Tonight it was a warm gleam. I felt like singing my favourite song "Gipsy Moon." But the contrast between my twisted body and the sentiments of the song would probably have proved too much for Susan. She would have laughed. And I would assuredly have hated her.

"I'm afraid my old bus is not like the opulent Portland's," I apologised for the Standard. "Some people, you see, seem to make a lot of money out of life. And some don't. I'm one of the latter. As an author who makes his own living I'm not such hot stuff."

It was a wild sort of feeler somewhat unsuited to the length of our acquaintanceship. How would she react now and in the future to the fact that I was not wealthy like Portland and Sheridan? Her gay little laugh thrilled out over the sandy marshes to left and right of the road near the Juhu aerodrome.

"I prefer old cars anyway," she said. "They're like old shoes or old hats. You never really want to get rid of them. They take a place in your heart, hold a pistol to your head, and you just can't get down to that final parting! In Selangor on the estate I had an old evening frock that I loved. Well, you know what we women usually are. Especially about frocks! Even if we're miles away from anywhere too. I just couldn't get rid of that frock—even after I'd spilled a gin pahit over it."

"Were you happy in Malaya?"

I was thinking of her male acquaintances in that tragic country. Had there been many? Had there been any more important than the rest? Somehow my soul, up to now bitter and murderous and evil, with the stench of violence lurking beneath its shoddy surface, considered the answer to the question vital.

Some of the brightness went out of her tone. I glanced at her profile in the dim light of the dashboard lamp. Her expression was one of incalculable regret.

"I can't say I was so terribly happy there, but I loved Malaya. There is no country that will quite take its place in my heart."

I swerved to avoid a passing car that seemed to be in the hands of a drunkard, its covered lights like the inflamed orbs of a sot bent upon destruction.

"Malaya," I muttered, "my God, the Japs certainly went through it like a knife through cheese. All those hundreds of miles in a matter of weeks. The hints one hears of mismanagement and mistakes.....one wonders....."

"I think they must have been true, all of them," she returned quietly. "It was a shambles. And, strangely enough, though the world will probably never believe it, no one behaved so strangely as some of our Australians. They're good fighters, as the world knows, but there was something about the Malaya episode that seemed to bring out the worst in them. Perhaps it was the mismanagement in certain departments and the lack of air support that made them wonder if they were getting a really square deal. I believe it was through their lines that the Japanese broke first but I think whether that is true or not will never be really known, for everything was in such confusion."

We turned down the main sandy track that would bring us out near the site of the once well-known Lone Palm, a giant palm that had only recently collapsed, torn down by one of the young tornados of the monsoon. At last we drew to a stop on the very edge of the sandy bank that marked the start of the beach and the limit of high tide. There were few cars out tonight. Since petrol restrictions Juhu had lost a great deal of its popularity. And the fact that there was a complete blackout from 10 p.m. made this Brighton of India but an anaemic shadow of its former self.

The sea breeze tugged at our hair and at Susan's frock as we got out of the car and spread a rug for supper. I could only dimly make out her features in the pale moonlight. But it was a lovely picture, subdued as it was. Somehow it soothed the wild desires that welled up within one. God alone knows, Himself, why He placed such desires into the framework of our beings. But is there a God? I sometimes wonder. When I think of men and women and children rent asunder by the bombs of warring nations I cannot but decide against the possibility. But when I think of the mysteries of life and birth itself, the amazing

machinery of the body and the human brain, the impulse to propagate one's species, the sight of a squirming pink bodied child that grows to be a thinking, talking man, the beauty of a tree or a bed of flowers, the smell of rain on hot earth, there remain few stones upon each other in my barrier against God.

"You are very lovely," I said suddenly, suspending the operation of opening the lunch basket for our supper. We stood motionless for a moment, looking at each other. She had a thermos flask in one hand and a plate in another. I was so close I could see the strange little twist to her lips. She spoke very softly.

"Thank you John—*may* I call you that? It seems we know each other well. We don't jar on each other's nerves, do we? May I?"

"You may indeed Susan." Somehow in that moment I forgot my twisted leg and the pain that racked me so often. I forgot Marianne. I forgot everything ugly in my life. I glanced out at the phosphorescent waves where they rolled in towards the palm trees. They seemed to come from another world. Somewhere to the left of us somebody touched the electric horn of a car. Then a girl giggled on a high note. We began supper and when we had finished sat down on the rug facing the restless sea.

"It never seems to get tired," murmured my companion at last. "The sea, I mean. It's been grumbling and tugging at the earth for centuries and centuries. In Malaya it creeps up the creeks amidst the tangle of the mangrove swamps. Have you ever seen mangrove trees in a swamp?"

I had seen many in my wanderings around the Pacific but I shook my head. It was restful to listen to her low, beautiful unaffected voice.

"The trees have long seed pods like enormous beans and these hang down and almost touch the water. The seeds fall into the water from the pods and a fresh shoot grows. Mostly you see fresh shoots coming up to meet the hanging branches of the older trees. The monkeys love them."

"I bet they do."

She fell silent and was silent so long I felt I had to speak.

"Tell me, Susan, about Malaya. I feel you've had a much more terrible time than you've given us to understand."

"War is always terrible," her voice was a whisper. "When I met you I hadn't a penny in the world. I hadn't had a real meal for a week. And I had been in Bombay eight days."

"But surely they have these evacuee relief centres?"

"They do. But there seems to be a fairly sound system. Government expects you to pay for things while you can. Then, when you are penniless, they take you on as a liability. You see, I had money. I drew a lot out before getting away from Selangor. But it was stolen the very night after I reached Bombay!"

"And you couldn't ask for help locally?"

"No. I had already said I was in possession of money—about a thousand rupees. I felt I couldn't say I had lost it. They wouldn't have believed me. So I thought I'd bluff it out. The police couldn't help about the money. They said they'd do their best of course. I was living in a miserable boarding house where you paid for what you ate, cash down. Naturally I didn't eat much. And I couldn't bear the thought of calling at flats and saying I had just arrived from Malaya—and could they please give the poor dog a bone. I've seen the looks on some people's faces. They don't believe you. And I don't blame them in a way. There must be all sorts of unscrupulous people taking advantage of this state of affairs."

"You poor child. But why the Taj Mahal Hotel above all places? Last night I mean. And your expensive flat?"

"I was desperate. I felt something *must* happen. Something very nice or something terrible. So I ate and drank till I was faint. I had already made up my mind that if something nice didn't happen I would surely throw myself into the sea or from one of the top windows of the hotel. Then you three dear people came along. It was Fate indeed."

I squirmed. Three dear people! Portland with his Evacuees' Employment Bureau. Sheridan with his ruthless rapacity roaring to avenge itself on a world that had at some time obviously hit him hard, some time, somewhere. Myself with a twisted leg and the deaths of two people behind me to warp my soul.

"I'm glad you think us nice," I said and wasn't surprised to find my voice husky. I cleared my throat. "One can be mistaken in people you know."

She laughed, all solemnity gone from her bearing and tone.

"In Mr. Portland's stout joviality and obvious good heartedness? Mr. Sheridan's rather cynical good nature? And in you, John—in the goodness that just can't help emerging from behind that bitter expression and voice of yours? Oh, no, I'm not blind!"

I shuddered at the pitifulness of her faith. And yet do any of us know the man next to us in the bus or train, the woman who hangs out the washing on the line next door, the man who sits opposite us at the office? They might all be murderers or maniacs or just plain honest to goodness citizens. They might be sadists or sexual perverts. The exquisitely groomed woman who sips her wine so delicately and smiles so condescendingly on the world around her might barter the bodies of girls in some "respectable house" that she may live in luxury, her soul like a shell of rotten fibre gnawed to dust by white ants. The benign priest leaning on his pulpit might be a pathetic homosexualist, as might also be the lovely young woman in the ravaging bathing dress at the local swimming pool, the unfeeling centre of admiring male eyes.

"But now that you people have brought me luck," went on Susan Mannerling blithely, "now that I have won over a thousand rupees, I am going to investigate my last chance of a home since Malaya has gone."

"Your last chance of a home? Where?"

She laughed softly.

"That puzzles you, Sir John? In a little place called Fyzabad. Fairly close to Lucknow and Cawnpore. My grandparents owned a small plot of land there many years ago—and a bungalow. My grandfather built it just before the Indian Mutiny. I'm sure it must be still there. I don't know where the title deed has got to but I'm sure I'll be able to establish my claim."

"And if it is still there?"

"I shall sort of go back to the land. There's no shame in it. God's soil is good and from it we can find sustenance if we trouble to work for it. Only most of us are too lazy and far too impressed by convention."

"I think you're crazy—but when do you intend going?"

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow. I think I'll leave by the Punjab Mail."

We were silent a long while after that. I wondered what Bombay would be like without her.

"You're thinking me ungrateful?" she asked softly. "Believe me, I shall return the goodness of you and your friends a thousandfold whenever I can possibly do it. Perhaps you don't think I should run off like this and leave you all so abruptly after accepting your kindness?"

"Pshaw! I was thinking of nothing like that, Susan!" I threw a piece of coconut shell that lay to hand far out into the glistening sand. "I shall miss you. Do you mind?"

She did not answer immediately. I was looking out at the sea. I felt certain she was ready to laugh, that she would burst out with some jolly, rending remark like "Poor John—you mustn't start falling in love with me you know."

Instead I felt soft fingers suddenly close round my right hand and something warm and wet dropped on the back of it.

"Now see what you've done to me," she said huskily. "I haven't cried for a long time. I never thought anyone would ever miss me again. Paul used to, but....."

"Paul?"

"Yes, my husband. I'm a widow you know, though I never wear my wedding ring. My husband managed a rubber plantation out in Malaya, in Selangor State. He obstinately refused to leave the place. And," she paused and seemed to be seeking for words, "when the Japanese came he foolishly defied them. One of them shot Paul dead with a burst from his Tommy gun. It was ghastly."

Her voice had been lifeless, as if her spirit were living again the torments of those terrible moments. She buried her face in her hands suddenly and I patted her shoulder awkwardly. How was I to stop her?

"Here, snap out of it Susan," I tried to speak cheerfully. "You can't do that here. Listen to the sea hissing at you!"

Next moment she was in my arms, sobbing bitterly. But knew it was not love she felt for me. Only the reaction from her memories.

"Susan," I whispered, prompted by a sudden impulse, "let me come with you to find your home."

## CHAPTER IV

TEA in the tea room at the Taj Mahal Hotel can be very pleasant indeed. What is it about the connection between the harbour there and tea that warms one? As one's teeth bite into the soft lusciousness of eclair or the delicious crispness of meringue one lets one's eyes play over the harbour and the multitude of craft that scatters the water. There is something fascinating about it.

In peace time white sails and awnings and the steady beat of oars or the throb of a motor boat and the bright cheerfulness of a passenger steamer would preponderate to make the scene picturesque and, yes, lovely. The scene is still picturesque but the grim battle grey of the vessels that crowd the harbour have stolen its loveliness long since. Pleasure and carefree happiness are things of the past. This is the message you get when you look at Bombay Harbour and think of the number of times you hired a sailing boat to take you round any large liner that happened to be berthed in the roads or to one of the lighthouses or to Middle Ground Island.

I had persuaded Susan to put off the journey to Fyzabad till next evening so that we could make one or two necessary purchases. I had a strange feeling that the trip marked a major crossroad in the lives of both of us.

Neither of us had referred during the day to the previous night. In fact her unchanged outward bearing indicated that she had forgotten all about her unguarded moments. We had mercifully not seen Portland and Sheridan during the day. I did not feel like explaining things to them.

"Why don't you write to the authorities at Fyzabad—whoever looks after property in that district—and find out about your house?" I asked suddenly. "That seems a more logical way of doing things than rushing off and spending a lot of money on a possible wild goose chase."

But Susan's eyes were dreamy. A slow smile spread over her lovely face.

" You men ! You're all so prosaic. Can't you imagine the thrill of walking in unannounced on a friend who thinks you're miles away ? Well, the same thing applies to a building ! And besides, my experience of any Government Department that is not out to relieve you of taxes is that it adheres strictly to that old saying of ours—out of sight out of mind. The search for documents and all the rest of it would take months longer than if you held a pistol to someone's head in person."

" You're an amazingly efficient person !" I said and I think my lips must have curled, for she said happily, " John, do you know you actually smiled ? That's the first time I've seen you smile since we've met ! "

I felt extraordinarily sheepish. But one finds it easy to smile when one has the memory of a soft body clasped in one's arms, even if that body is only taking refuge in a fleeting sanctuary from the physical and mental terrors that beset it.

" Besides," she added quickly, soberly, and there was no laughter in her eyes, " I think it would be good to take a trip. There's so much I want to forget and if I keep myself busy for a while I may succeed."

I looked out again over the rippling sea with the afternoon sun setting gold spangles in its silvery grey surface.

" You loved your husband very much ? " I asked. Somehow a great deal seemed to hinge on her reply. It was a few moments before she said anything. She drank some tea. Her eyes were troubled.

" I never loved him at all," she said abruptly. " Poor Paul, he loved me terribly but.....well, that's why I don't wear my wedding ring now. It wouldn't be fair somehow."

" Tell me about him," I urged, hardly able to keep the eagerness out of my tone. But she shook her head tiredly.

" Not now, John. You must understand."

I ordered some more tea. The world seemed slightly less grey to my peculiarly jealous soul. Susan seemed cleaner, purer. I could not have borne to think that her loveliness had been possessed by any man with her full consent, physical and spiritual. And then the pleasure and relief of the moment was nullified by the arrival of Sheridan. He espied us from the door as he came in and walked straight over. His sardonic face was more hateful than ever to me. His voice was cheerful.

" Well I never ! We've been wondering where on earth you two had got to. Portland suggested that you'd eloped and got married but I hinted that that was hardly likely

taking into consideration the briefness of your acquaintance-ship."

Susan laughed.

"Mr. Traill and I have been discussing—Well—Malaya and—oh—cabbages and kings."

Sheridan wagged a laboriously playful finger before pulling up a chair and sitting down.

"Aha! When anyone says that I know there's romance in the air—with a capital R. How lovely indeed is love!"

I did not miss the fleeting glance at my face and leg.

"For God's sake be your age, Sheridan," I snapped. "You're behaving like two extremes, a doddering old fool and a hysterical child."

He laughed abruptly.

"And a display of temper, when one is thus accused of leaving one's self open to the shafts of Cupid," he went on, "is an even surer indication of romantic guilt."

There was a gleam in his eyes that only Portland or I could accurately have interpreted, or even distinguished, from long proximity with it. Outwardly he was the perfect friend, exercising a slightly cynical, slightly dry humour. He helped himself to a cake and gave an order for tea to the waiter who had appeared. Then he eyed Susan quizzically. What was it she had said about him?—"Mr. Sheridan's rather cynical good humour!" She had never seen him whip a native coolie in Rangoon to within an inch of his life, a story he delighted in telling in his more bitter moods. She hadn't seen him jab the broken top of a whisky bottle into the perspiring fat face of a Dutchman who had drunkenly and playfully called him a bastard in Batavia.

"Miss Mannering....." he began but she interrupted him quietly.

"Mrs. Mannering, Mr. Sheridan." Sheridan nearly dropped the remains of the piece of cake he held. "Yes," she went on, "as I've already explained to Mr. Traill, my husband was killed by the Japanese in Malaya."

"I'm sorry to hear about that, very sorry indeed," came from Sheridan contemplatively. "Well, that only serves to prompt me to act more quickly. Have you any experience of advertising?"

She shook her head. Sheridan continued quickly.

"Well, can you draw or paint? Can you write a cheery and fairly intelligent letter? If so I can offer you a position in my firm."

I watched her expression closely as she replied. It was one of ineffable relief.

"Yes, I can draw. I was always very fond of it. Line sketches mostly, with a small knowledge of water colour. Oh Mr. Sheridan, do you really mean what you say?"

I had never hated Sheridan more than in that moment.

"Of course. I can arrange to pay you four hundred a month to start with. Later we'll see about increments."

So he was choosing his usual cunning way to win her. I had known many attractive girls accept positions in his firm. Some had stayed quite a long time. Others a few weeks or days. It all depended on the degree of their virtuosity. Then suddenly Susan's face dropped.

"I'm terribly grateful," she said, "but I can't. You see, I've decided to go back home."

"Home? To Malaya—really Mrs. Mannerling, you're springing surprise after surprise on us today! You must be mad to suggest....."

She smiled.

"No, not Malaya—a place called Fyzabad. My grandparents had property there. I've never seen it—or Fyzabad—but....."

"Oh, in that case there's nothing I can do, is there?" Sheridan laughed shortly. I think only he and I knew the extent of his regret.

"I'm terribly grateful!" she repeated earnestly. "You are all so kind to me."

"What, has Traill been trying to help too? Don't tell me he offered you a post as his private secretary—to type his appalling books and stories. I'm afraid the poor chap wouldn't be able to guarantee your salary! The publishing trade has suffered very considerably due to the war."

He spoke good humouredly on the surface. But he and Portland knew my sensitivity about my unremunerative career, my ineffectuality in any other sphere.

I was glad she did not think it necessary to reply. Sheridan and Portland must not know we planned to go to Fyzabad together. If they did know our lives would be a perfect misery. And that misery did not mean the playful sort engendered by a desire to tease. I resolved to make this clear to her at the earliest possible moment. And that moment was now. I took up the thread of Sheridan's last words.

"The publishing business is beginning to look up, contrary to what you think. You might be interested to know that I have to call on Trenton & Company in Delhi day after tomorrow in connection with that last novel I sent them. Mrs. Mannerling and I will take the same train as far as Jhansi, where she'll branch off to Lucknow and Fyzabad."

It seemed a childish sort of subterfuge and I almost regretted using it as soon as I had spoken and saw Sheridan raise his eyebrows.

"Is that so?" he asked. Susan looked puzzled for a moment and then smiled. I knew she understood. And in the next second I found my twisted nature wondering whether she was used to such subterfuge. She had said she never loved her husband. Were there other men then to whom she had been as kind as to me? Kinder perhaps?

We arranged that we would all see a picture together that evening and then have dinner at the Taj. Susan laughingly said she hoped the waiter who had served her on the occasion of our first meeting had forgotten her.

When Portland heard the news from Sheridan about Susan's trip his fat face fell, literally. His mouth hung grotesquely open, showing his wolf-like teeth.

"Good lord," he said snuffingly, "she can't do that! I've already decided to offer her a job as Manageress of the Blue Heaven Restaurant on Marine Drive."

The look Sheridan gave him was one of amused contempt.

"You're not the only one concerned with her welfare," he said. "We're all being most honourable. I wonder what's come over us?" A sneer had entered his voice. "Do you think the three of us have any ulterior motives? But no, you haven't offered her anything yet, have you Traill—unless you have put forward the secretary idea. Well, it's always the pathetic poor chap who wins in the end, you know. Just show her your leg one day and....."

"Shut your sneering mouth, you swine!" I snarled at him. A cripple will understand the fury in my soul, a fury I cannot describe.

"Yes, Sheridan, cut it out," put in Portland absently. "There's no need to get personal with Traill. You know how he hates it. So she's trying to be independent, eh?"

He sat for a while rubbing his chin. The diamond ring on his finger glittered in a shaft of sunlight that came through our drawing room window. Then he smiled a slow smile.

"What place did you say—Fyzabad? That's in the United Provinces isn't it? A one-eyed hole if I remember rightly—with good fishing in the Gogra River."

I realised then how childish indeed had been my attempt at subterfuge. How inevitable it had been that both these men would not want to let out of their sight for one moment the refreshing jewel that had entered the threads of their sticky webs. And I suddenly realised too, with queer bitter clarity, that I was no better than they. That I desired this woman. That I wished to know the mysteries of her soul and body. That the thought of marriage had entered my head for but one brief second and had been driven forth because I knew marriage could only lead to her hating me and my crippled body and bitter nature, even if out of pity for my presumptuousness she agreed to marry me. I knew that I could never marry her even if she said she loved me. For I knew that her love would soon change. I knew that as the weeks went by she would gaze more and more askance at the twisted hulk that lay beside her. I experienced in advance the searing bitterness of a love grown clammy and cold and slimy, a morass of despair that might have been so golden and rosy a passage of life. I dimly heard Portland snuffing:

"I must call on Fyzabad as soon as I think she's settled down."

## CHAPTER V

SUSAN and I left on the Punjab Mail at a quarter past four next evening. I can vividly recall the somewhat ridiculous picture of Sheridan and Portland standing outside the grilled barriers waving. No platform tickets were issued at the time because of hundreds of evacuees rushing the trains.

Susan had the coupe next to mine and the windows were so close that we could talk to each other by merely putting our heads slightly out of our windows.

The journey was hot. We were held up at a small place about fifty miles from Bombay by the derailment of a goods train caused by four wagons of explosives having blown up. Susan and I walked up and down the parched gravelled platform, talking of her future. She planned to have a tiny farm if she could and be more or less self supporting. The rigours of the climate apparently held no terrors for her.

"I'll keep chickens—and a cow," she said smiling. "And in front of the house there'll be a lovely little garden with all sorts of flowers. At the back will be my vegetable garden. I shall sell the eggs and milk I don't want and I shall also do a lot of needle-work for people in the station. I don't think I'll need much money. And then there's my drawing. I'm sure I shall be able to work up some sort of connection with the *Illustrated Weekly of India* and other papers out here for illustrating articles and stories. John, I'm sure I'll be all right. Don't you feel the same about me? Do say yes!"

I nodded. I did not like to draw for her a picture of some of India's smaller stations, where the club membership—if there happened to be a club—might be in the region of a couple of dozen or so people who got sick of the sight of each other's faces. Of course she must have experienced something of the sort in Malaya but somehow one considered planters' estates in Malaya and cantonment stations in India as different as chalk and cheese. There seemed no point in bringing to her notice the fact that few people would want to buy her eggs and milk anyway. It was easy enough to

get them at heartbreakingly low prices from India's agrarian and depressed classes, her tillers of the soil, horny handed and poverty stricken, the pitiful millions spread over India's vastness, yet the backbone of the land.

But I had no argument against the earning power she might govern with her drawing. Then again, however, few people in India made much money out of free lance drawing. The market was small. The payment bad. Wriggling under the surface of my conscience was the serpent of a half formed hope. The hope that she would not see the folly of her plans for living on a cow and a vegetable garden together with whatever spasmodic income might accrue from her drawing. Into my mind crept that insidious poison that made one say one thing with one's lips and another, far different, with one's heart. Penniless and helpless in this small station, this Fyzabad, she would soon be at my mercy. The phrase suddenly fanned the dormant evil in my soul. I had been almost dreaming of romance when I should have been planning like Sheridan and Portland for her capture and destruction.

I glanced sideways at her animated face in the light of the redly setting sun and my desire for her increased. I heard a child cry from the window of a carriage a little way from ours "Oh Mummy, look how funnily that man is walking." I actually managed to smile at the foolish shred of humanity. But its mother, a frowsy looking Anglo Indian woman with heavy gold bangles at her wrists, would never know how near her offspring had been to death.

At last we were on our way, the train picking its way carefully along the line. We passed the scene of the disaster, where the high tension cable had been blown from the up-rights, starting fires on either side of the track. A large bogey lay almost across both tracks and we could have touched its upturned side without putting more than our wrists outside the window. A battered looking engine wheezed at the head of a few more shattered trucks that had managed to evade joining their companions off the track. Salvage parties were at work. We began to gather speed into the fast falling dusk.

\* \* \*

We changed at Jhansi next evening amongst a cosmopolitan crowd of picturesque Indians on the platform, jostling and pushing and shouting. We reached Fyzabad at about half past nine. The station was small and unimpressive but it had a first class refreshment room, a tiny chamber into which two tables just fitted and where neatly clad and turbanned servants waited on us.

During dinner we asked for particulars about hotels. There were none in the station, not for Europeans anyway.

"Why not let's go straight to the house?" said Susan. "I remember the number and the road—who could forget No. 13, Hope Road?"

"Why not?" I echoed; knocking at my brain was the hammer of temptation, small at first and then swelling to proportions which produced a mental din that confused me. Was it innocence that had led her to so naively accept me as a companion on this trip? Did she know from previous experience or from the letters of her relatives that the station boasted no hotels? But she had told Sheridan she had never seen Fyzabad. I thought I would at least try and sound respectable, even if my desires were anything but so.

"I could stay the night here anyway," I said. "In the waiting room. These couch things are not so uncomfortable."

"Nonsense John!" there was nothing coquettish in her tone. "Why should you make yourself miserable here? From what I remember granny saying about the house there are at least four large rooms. And who's to know we're not married anyway?" A smile came to her face, utterly devoid of artfulness or suggestiveness. "I could put on my wedding ring again, you know! It would be fun pretending."

Her eyes met mine then and I could have sworn I saw in them a light that was strange to me, strange in her where I was concerned I mean. It was a light that said she loved me. The next second I knew I was being a fool. It would take any girl years to love a cripple such as I with a face of such appalling ugliness. But might there not be some sadistic sense within her that drew her to my very hideousness?

We set out in a ricketty tonga for Hope Road, another two such clattering vehicles carrying our luggage behind. A lump of rubber was out of one of our tyres and the wheel "thump-thumped" nerve rackingly along, jarring us every twelve feet. The moon grinned sardonically at us, her light picking out the ruts in the dusty road. Susan chuckled.

"This is fun!" she said again, softly.

"I'm glad you think so," I returned drily. "I've never had such a confounded ride in all my life!"

"I mean pretending that we're married," she said. "I wonder why we adults suddenly get a thrill from being childish sometimes?"

"*Ap ne bara number kaha?*" asked the odorous tonga wallah, breaking in of a sudden on Susan's soft voice. He

seemed doubtful even of which road he was on. My Hindustani is not very good but I somewhat forcefully reminded him that we had asked for number 13—not 12. We rattled to a standstill and he looked blankly at us.

"Number thirteen sahib?" he asked in broken English.

"Yes, you fool. Have you any objection?" I demanded.

"Nahin sahib, nahin. We go at once."

"He's behaving very strangely," said Susan subduedly. Something depressing had entered the atmosphere for some reason or the other. The moon seemed to grin even more broadly. The tonga driver clicked his tongue at his tired old horse and we moved on.

At last we came to a rattling stop at a ghostly looking tumble down gate. In the background, eerie in the moonlight, stood a hulk of a building. Susan and I walked up the weed covered drive together. The scene was desolate indeed. The place was in ruins. The moon shone down through the roofless walls and sneered at the piles of cowdung and filth that littered the floors. A bevy of bats fled squeaking from a gloomy corner, ridiculing us. From a gaunt leafless tree outside a screech owl hurled invective at us. Susan's voice had a break in it.

"It's—it's been deserted for years. I never expected this."

She fell silent as we walked through the crumbling rooms. The wood had been removed from doors and windows. Piles of masonry and mud lay here and there where walls had collapsed.

"We never heard again from granny after she had told us grandfather had died. That was eleven years ago. She must have followed him very soon. She said she was leaving the house to me." There was a bitter little note in her voice.

As we climbed back into the tonga I felt a sudden overpowering exultation. My mother's golden charm seemed to be bringing me luck. It rested warmly against my neck. I was glad the house was no more. She had loved the thought of it too much. But in the next breath I cursed the Fate that had now placed her in the position of having to obviously accept Sheridan's offer of a job.

"Let's get back to the waiting rooms," I said. "We must get some sleep. Tomorrow we'll look up the District Commissioner or Collector or whatever he is and see if there are any records and what can be done about things. You may be able to at least sell the land."

Next morning, in the District Commissioner's dusty office, we learnt the worst. He was a wizened little man with

glasses on the tip of his nose and a look about him that was as dusty as his files and yet self possessed. An hour and a half's search by his subordinates had produced the information.

"Harriet Waters," he said, "did buy the building. But the land was only leased to her for twenty years. The lease expired last year. I think you are entitled to the building. I'll look it up."

"Please don't trouble," said Susan faintly and we took our departure. We had barely got off the verandah however, when the dried up looking little man, who had followed us out, called to us.

"Just a minute please."

We turned and went back to him, wondering if he had suddenly thought of some way out of Susan's predicament. It was a way out that he suggested, but was nothing to do with her grandparents' house or land. There was an eager smile on his dry round face and his eyes gleamed expectantly behind his powerful spectacles.

"Won't you please stay with us for a while?" he asked. "My wife would be only too pleased. I know it must be a terrible blow to you two expecting to find the house here and . . . ." he shrugged his shoulders. Susan and I looked at each other undecidedly for a moment. Then "Why not?" said our glances. Now that we had come a thousand miles there was no point in rushing back immediately.

"You see," continued the little man, his glance now on Susan's wedding ring, "we get so lonely here. Since Fyzabad closed down as a really big military station it's enough to drive one crazy."

I wondered vaguely as he ushered us back into the office whether it was only Fyzabad that drove him crazy or Fyzabad and his wife. He looked the good natured ineffectual little type that makes an excellent subject for henpecking, however well he might be able to hold his own in a quiet way amongst men.

"If you'll just sit down and wait for a few minutes while I clear up one or two details we'll dash along home for lunch together. I've got one of the few cars in the station—not counting of course the General Transport Company which is here. They've got about a hundred lorries I think." He chuckled at his mild joke, saw us seated, and briskly set about his work.

Mr. York, as we found his name was, was a chatty little soul and as we drove off he gave us an expressive word picture of Fyzabad Cantonment.

"It's mean of me really to ask you to stay—selfish I should say. For the place is half dead. Before war broke out we used to have our officers and their ladies riding across country and along the tracks as happily as anywhere in the country. The Club used to be a great social centre. It still is, really, for the handful of us that are left. But things are not the same. There's an air of tragedy about it all. You feel that there are dozens of towns like this throughout the length and breadth of India which will never live again now that they have died. Saturday nights at the Club are the best attended—they have a dance then. We use a gramophone. Once used to have a regimental orchestra. And any evening you can get plenty of tennis—especially on a Saturday and Sunday. All the ladies that can play turn out, and the young subs from the regiment and the M. T. Companies. There's a swimming pool and then the River Gogra's good for a sail or for fishing. Rotten old boats but good enough for a break from the monotony. Not a marvellous place I'm afraid but I'm sure you and Mrs. Mannering will enjoy a short stay at least, Mannering."

It was a few seconds before the full import of his last sentence really struck me. I opened my mouth to speak but Susan checked me with a slim urgent hand on my arm.

"This is a pretty kettle of fish—for you mainly," I muttered as we got out of the car at Mr. York's bungalow and he hustled up to the main front door. "I suppose we've just got to stay married now! I wonder what Portland and Sheridan would say." The idea appealed to me of a sudden and I chuckled. Susan laughed too.

"It's fun," she whispered. "And there's no harm done, is there?"

"None at all. But don't let's slip up now, otherwise our names will be mud! You know what a small community can be like as narrow as a camel's hind leg. We'd never get over the covert glances and the whispers. 'See those two over there my dear? Well, I'm sure they're carrying on a love affair my dear. The woman called the man Mr. Traill just now and he actually addressed her as Mrs. Mannering! What do you think my dear?'"

"Come on in!" called York and we followed him onto the verandah and into the house which was a huge, high roofed cool affair with *khus-khus* 'tatties' at doors and windows and the delicious smell of an Indian curry pervading the rooms from somewhere at the back.

"My wife won't be long. She always insists on cooking the curry herself! Says no one in India can do it like her!"

He chuckled but I noticed he started a little when a deep, resonant feminine voice from the back of the house called out.

"For heaven's sake don't let them stand about without tea or something Malcolm! Get the bearer busy. There's nothing like a cup of tea with lemon in it on a hot day."

Mrs. York turned out to be an enormous woman. But she carried herself well, with a stately bearing that clearly said she must be the ruler of Fyzabad society. Her face was large and friendly looking, adopting, however, a stern expression whenever she addressed her husband, who took every opportunity he could of winking at us behind her back.

"Oh, I'd love to have you here!" she enthused when Mr. York had suggested our staying for a few days before returning to Bombay. "And I'm sure you'll enjoy your stay. We'll do our best to make it the perfect honeymoon for you. Oh dear, you are newly married, aren't you? Forgive me if you are not!"

Everything about her suggested that it would be a perfect tragedy if we were not. We laughed, rather shakily I noticed, but the very nervousness of our mirth seemed to reassure her and answer her question to her entire satisfaction.

"We've got half of this huge rambling place empty—never use it," she babbled gaily on and ushered us around the house much in the manner that a hen fusses round her chicks. Not a flicker of embarrassment crossed her beaming face when she showed us her bathroom, even though an enormous pair of yellow knickers and an outsize in brassieres hung across a line. She seemed to take an especial fancy to Susan and kept patting her shoulder as we made progress through the house.

"Don't let him boss you," she said, suddenly glaring at me wildly. "If you give a man an inch, Susan, he'll take a mile. And if you foolishly give him your body and your soul together, all at once as it were, he'll tire of you in less time than it takes you to say rabbit. Keep something in reserve, my dear."

Susan's face was flushed as we listened, willy nilly, to this unusual homily and Mr. York, who was pottering along after us in rear, called out with a chuckle:

"Don't mind Vera. She has such delicate finesse. No sooner will you have had tea than she'll tell you all about birth control, the latest methods and the desirability of regulating the arrival of children in these terrible days of war."

## CHAPTER VI

WHEN I killed Marianne I never thought I would again meet a woman who would govern my sentiments, my thoughts and the impulses of my body. Perhaps you find it strange, even bizarre, reading these lines from a self-confessed murderer. I do not blame you. I wish I could make it clear to you however, just *why* I had to kill Marianne. It is impossible to put it into words. But when you condemn me as a killer you might stop for a moment and think of the "killers" who commit worse than murder of human flesh. White slave traffickers. Big businessmen who count it a feather in their caps to ruin smaller businessmen. Men in key positions who misuse their authority and power, arbiters of the fate of millions. But what purpose can anyone achieve by making excuses? None. I am what I am, prompted by strange feelings and surges that I cannot control, no matter how I may try.

Susan and I found ourselves up against a major problem that night. Mrs. York wouldn't hear of us sleeping outside as she was certain a storm was brewing. She could "smell it in the air." And a "honeymooning" couple could not possibly occupy separate rooms—especially in the face of the delightfully frank Mrs. York's ogling direction of affairs. After dinner she led us both to the room she had decided we must occupy and cheerfully reminded Susan not to forget what she had told her, adding by way of a rider, rather misplaced I thought, that all men are beasts anyway but easily controlled *via* their stomachs and their sexual desires. She departed expressing regret that there was no bolt to the door of our room.

You, my dear reader, may shudder at the thought of big, stout, cheerful Mrs. York. She may seem revolting to you, some monstrous maniac fit only for the lethal chamber. But if prudery be one of your failings, as murder and bitterness are two of mine, think, just for one moment again, how many men and women would like to be as frank as Mrs. York. Consider what the world might be like if we were all so

frank. The shocking impact of open discussion about the great mystery of sex and all its ramifications would disappear. We would talk about love play and sexual intercourse with probably much the same aplomb as we would discuss the stock and share market, influenza and the condition of Hitler's brain. Nudism, say those who have experienced it, does away with prudery and complexes. Were it universally adopted, with frankness as its watchword, we might even hope that it would do away with a large percentage of maniacs, exhibitionists and perverts. But I must not dare to encroach, especially in my pitifully uninformed manner, on the fields of Havelock Ellis or other great authorities on life's most complex problem. Besides, I think I tend to preach. And that is boring.

But I know that when Susan and I were alone in our room and our host and hostess had departed, my heart was thudding against my ribs and my breath seemed to have been driven from my body by some powerful, crushing force.

"Susan," I muttered, "what the hell are we going to do?"

I limped across the room towards her and in that moment I thought I saw fear in her eyes. Perhaps as she saw my right leg dragging along towards her and became aware of the look on my twisted face some presage of evil filled her. Perhaps Marianne's spirit entered her body for a moment to warn her against me. I do not know.

"What can we do John?" her voice was low as she continued packing her suitcase. "We don't seem to have thought of things like this. We've just been making plans and letting Destiny rule us. And why not, after all?"

She suddenly closed the lid of the suitcase, some delicate chiffon creation over her arm.

"Why not let Destiny rule us! Whatever happens to us is written long before we are born."

I moved close to her and looked deep into her eyes.

"I daren't stay in this room, Susan," I said tersely.

She stepped back slightly from me, the shadow of fear again in her deep brown eyes. Or was it a shadow of fear? Was it not some cunningly instinctive light of invitation?

"There—there needn't be anything between us," she whispered. "Later on when the house is quiet and they've gone to sleep you could sleep in—in the drawing room or something. But no—they might find out and that would be more awkward than ever. Oh dear, we are in a mess! You'll just have to stay here, that's all. You can sleep on the floor."

She smiled suddenly and whisked into the bathroom. I moved restlessly about the room. I felt sure there had been a look of invitation in her eyes and bearing and even in her words. But a man can be so mistaken when he desires a woman.

A flash of lightning lit up the skylights and the distant rumble of thunder followed seconds afterwards. Mrs. York had been right in her weather forecast. The air seemed suddenly intolerable. I hate storms. They cloud my brain. They fill me with fear and deep within me, hysteria.

I watched Susan emerge from the old fashioned bathroom and lie down, her dressing gown still about her perfect figure.

"Your turn to change, Sir John," she said lightly. "And while you're changing I'll fix your bed up on the floor."

I apologised for having asked to accompany her to Fyzabad and for putting her in this predicament.

It must have been midnight when I awoke and rose from my uncomfortable bed on the floor. I couldn't have been sleeping for more than an hour. The storm had passed and a broad shaft of moonlight shone down from one of the skylights and illuminated Susan's beauty.

Marianne was lovely. There used to be times, when I would be watching her dive and swim in her private swimming pool, that I felt her very loveliness would kill me, so forcibly did it fill my heart to the exclusion of other things.

And now Susan, with her dark eyes and hair and pale, transparent looking face, her red full lips, the straight little nose and the fine hands and feet, the perfect contour of breast and thigh.

I stood looking down at her with madness at my heart. Never had I beheld anything so utterly desirable. One leg of her pink pyjamas had slipped up and revealed a soft looking, shapely calf. I wanted to kiss her tiny feet. I moved towards the bed. And just then the door swung open. It was Mrs. York. She tiptoed over to me. She did not appear to have noticed the blankets on the floor the other side of the bed.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I just peeped in to see if you two were all right or whether the storm had upset you. The roof sometimes leaks too. But it all seems to have passed over now."

\* \* \*

Next evening our hosts took us along to the Happy Valley Club. The grounds were extensive, though actually, I learnt

later, they were not the Club grounds at all but a sort of public garden that had been much used in the old days. There were sweeping drives and pathways and wide expanses of lawn dotted with beds of roses and nasturtium. The River Gogra flowed within a few yards of the forward limits of the grounds, its white sandy bed covered with scrub where the water did not flow. Fringing the path that ran parallel to and nearest to the river was a long line of dwarf palms. To the right of us as we approached the Club House the vivid reddish purple blossoms of a bougainvilloea creeper made savage harmony with the drooping yellow sprays of an Indian laburnum. A jacaranda tree stood near the swimming pool, its delicately pale violet blossoms shyly subdued before the passionate blood red and rich yellow beauty of the gold mohur that woed it boldly from a few yards away. Near the front porch the wind sighed softly through the sadly drooping needles of a thoughtful casuarina tree.

The tennis courts were well kept and a slightly Burmese touch was provided to the area near them by a conical roofed pavilion. Nearer the swimming pool a riot of flowers made colourful harmony in the rockeries that surrounded the bases of a group of trees. A tall eucalyptus giant reared his pale purity of trunk and branch and leaf at one end of the pool.

"Why, this is heavenly!" burst out Susan.

"Without it we'd not be able to exist, my dear," said Mrs. York. "What I mean is, people are all right in a lonely place but trees and flowers and lovely scenery can't back-bite and slander, can they? You'll meet everyone on Saturday I suppose. That's when they have a dance and extra social tennis. You never saw such a hoo-ha in your life. Everyone rushes round in circles for the earlier part of the evening, expecting something different to happen *this* time. And after about half an hour they're all drooping about all over the place like a lot of wet drawers, disappointment in every line of them."

Her expression was perfectly cheerful as she spoke and there was not the slightest touch of malice in her voice. In fact, a little later, when an elderly but striking woman arrived with someone who appeared to be her husband, I was amazed at the spirit of cameraderie that exuded from her as she said cheerfully :

"Mrs. Granger! We haven't seen you for a fortnight. My word, you don't look a day older than your forty-five years."

Mr. York, who seemed to enjoy the somewhat shattering effulgence of his wife, later whispered :

" You'll get us blacklisted one day Vera. For God's sake try and control yourself and behave like a District Commissioner's wife."

We went to the bar and had a drink, examined the excellently sprung dance floor and then the library and billiard room and then made our way out to the swimming pool. A girl and a young man were the sole users of the pool at the time and it was fairly obvious to see that they were husband and wife. She was pretty in a tight-skinned, frizzy haired way but her narrow forehead and close set eyes displayed other qualities which rather detracted from the general effect. The man was lanky and knobbly kneed, with a tendency to pigeon chestedness.

" Go on Arthur, for God's sake dive ! " she was admonishing the boy in an affected drawl as we walked up the steps. " Why don't you take a few lessons from Ronnie ? You're an excellent husband but an awful slop in the water."

He glared at her. I presumed rather obviously that Ronnie was her hero. How much so was soon to be proved by an event which I'm sure no one who was there at the time would believe today if they read my story.

" Meet Mr. and Mrs. Lyons," sang out Mrs. York brightly. " The town's most newly weds. Folks, this is Mrs. Mannering and her husband. They rather beat you, I think, in young love, for I'm sure they were only married the other day. I caught Mr. Mannering gazing at his wife last night after the storm as if he could have fought the entire world, including those piffing old bastards Hitler and Mussolini, in her interests."

Susan glanced at me questioningly, a slight smile ready to expand on her lips. Nobody seemed to mind Mrs. York's language. The young couple carried on after a moment or two as if we had not been there and the girl's tongue, if anything, became somewhat more sharp and discontented as she childishly railed at her husband.

We left the pool and went over to the tennis courts where a tall thin grey haired man was playing a set against an Indian clad in a dhoty, obviously the marker. I noticed Mrs. York's face was tenderly expectant, almost motherly, as we approached. I wondered if she secretly loved the man. But she soon dispelled my supposition.

" Here," she confided, " is one of the most unfortunate men I have seen. He's a poor pervert who's happy looking at the photographs he takes of little girls at the schools he visits. He talks of nothing but them and his work. And he wouldn't hurt a fly."

Mr. Christopher Bishop seemed perfectly normal to me at first sight. His eyes were constantly dropping to the level of one's neck and he had a nervous habit of running his tongue round the back of his lips every few seconds, this operation resulting in a peculiar pursing of the mouth. Tiny purple veins ran near the surface of the skin of his face and hands. His hand was cold and damp when he greeted us.

"I'm glad to see you in Fyzabad, Mr. and Mrs. Mannering," he said. "You must really have a good time here. There's nothing much to do of course. Perhaps you'd care to come and see me some time. I live at 50, The Mall. I could interest you, I'm sure, in some of the pictures I show at schools. I tour the whole of India. Gave up my work as the teacher of a score to reach the thousands of little children who needed my help. I have short educational films, leased from M.G.M. and other companies. I love children you know. I really don't know what I'd do without them."

He babbled on, not seeming to care whether we listened or not, until we eventually took our leave of him.

"You'll probably meet the others later," said Mrs. York as we made our way towards the river. "There's Major Mohammed Khan of the M. T. Company and his four young officers. Nice lads but frightfully irresponsible. I believe Major Khan is a bit domineering with them. Of course you can never believe what these young chaps will say—especially when they happen to be British and under an Indian. It doesn't seem to go down well with them. On the other hand, with all this Congress trouble it's a wonder to me the whole of India doesn't frankly say it wants to revolt against Britain. But then I suppose they're afraid of these bloody Japs. And we really have prevented them from making much headway until war came along and we *had* to. There's no getting away from that. But by God, I'd like to lay my hands on some of those Japanese swine, wouldn't you? Bayoneting our poor soldiers in Hong Kong and raping our women. It's a wonder God allows it. I wonder if there is a God anyway?"

Her peroration was cut short by a sudden gasp from Susan. I was looking down at the ground at that moment, picking the way carefully for my crippled leg. But without even looking up I was amazed at the premonition of disaster that shot through me. When I did look up it was to Susan's cry of :

"Peter Chambers!—it's you! Goodness gracious, it was only the other day you left Sumatra for Singapore again!"

A young man in bathing trunks was a few feet from us, advancing from the river, where he had obviously been swimming. His hair was fair and crisp and curly, his face boyish and tanned, with a hardness about the eyes that suffering and strain can bring. He had a finely trimmed dark moustache and his grey eyes and depth of forehead, coupled with a blunt nose and clean cut jaw, made quite an impressive picture if you looked at him without my sentiments. The muscles rippled under the satiny skin of his powerful looking arms and straight legs. I hated him. Everything that was evil in me welled to the surface. I knew instinctively, warned by the sharpened senses that can only belong to your true clairvoyant or cripple, that here stood the embodiment of disaster.

"I never made it," he said. "Singapore had fallen. I was bunged along to Java and then to India for a few days' rest. I was in pretty bad shape, Susan. I saw my mother in Delhi, thank heavens. Then I was sent here to reconnoitre for an aerodrome we hope to build. No rest for an airman, eh? Here today—at the end of the world tomorrow. But by gad it's good seeing you! I thought we'd never meet again."

"We know each other in Malaya," explained Susan, her eyes bright and guileless. "He saved my life when we were escaping."

"Nonsense, you ass!" he said laughing. His voice was deep and young. I loathed it as much as I loathed the rest of him. "On the island you mean, when the old 'Lucky Susan' cracked up? We'll tell you the story some day, folks, and then you can decide for yourselves how women romance about their so called rescuers."

We shook hands all round. Mrs. York was patently overjoyed that Susan and the stripling should know each other. I found myself recalling Susan's words about her husband. "I never loved him at all. That's why I don't wear my wedding ring. It wouldn't be fair somehow." Covertly watching them as they exchanged swift, eager enquiries as to what each of them had been doing since they parted on "the island," half their number rescued by one ship and half by another, I came to the obvious conclusion. They loved each other. And at that moment the same wild exultation I had experienced when we found her house in ruins swept over me. For I remembered that to Fyzabad we were Mr. and Mrs. Mannering. The full import of the introduction by Mrs. York did not seem to have penetrated Susan's consciousness. She chatted away gaily and I knew that I was, for the moment, forgotten. The experience was deadly.

## CHAPTER VII

"THAT," said Mrs. York, "is Major Mohammed Khan, the chap with a face like a banana sitting near the gramophone."

It was Saturday night and she was indicating to us the inhabitants of Fyzabad as they entered the Happy Valley Club for the great weekly event, the dance, and apparently, as they appeared to her somewhat fertile mind. The Indian officer had a long, narrow face and was looking about with an air that might have been studied nonchalance or profound awkwardness.

"And over there, by the window, the left hand one," continued Mrs. York in her stage whisper, "is Ronnie Gibson. I'm sure he's in love with that affected Mary Lyons creature. What both of them want is their drawers taken down and a damned good spanking. I believe in free love all right, but only for those that deserve it. Nice people, like Malcolm and I—eh Malcolm ? "

I wondered how he tolerated her boisterousness but he sounded affectionately enough as he said, "For heaven's sake woman ! Can't you control your tongue ? You say the most outrageous things ! "

She chuckled and came back to her long distance descriptions of the people in the room.

"It's really not worth introducing you to them now," she said as she screwed her nose up. "Later perhaps, when they're all warmed up and a bit drunk. I love seeing people —except Malcolm—a little drunk, don't you ? I usually go into fits. Makes life worth living. I once had a monkey I made drunk—ah !—here's one of Fyzabad's really interesting people—Mrs. Jacob."

A thin, sharp featured old woman had entered and taken her seat near a table fan, looking round the room with complete self possession.

"She murdered her husband eight years ago," went on Mrs. York.

"Shut up Vera, you fool!" snapped Mr. York a trifle sharply. "There wasn't an atom of proof. The case was one of suicide. You'll find yourself in the dock one of these fine days defending yourself against a charge of libel—and I won't be able to help you."

Mrs. York was contemptuous.

"Pshaw! Do you think a woman can bluff me? That dear fellow commit suicide! Not on your life. I could see it coming off a long time before it happened. I've almost got second sight, you know. I suppose it's just a sharp brain really. Now take Ronnie Gibson. The other night I had the most vivid dream about him. I dreamt he was a corpse and standing over him, looking most frightfully pleased about things, was Jack Lyons. There's trouble brewing there—mark my words."

With which gloomy prognostication she cheerfully proceeded to point out some of the women.

"There's Miss Wilson. She's a nurse in the Hospital. A sweet creature. Don't you like that delicate colouring and gentle looking manner? All the young officers do. She was supposed to have been in a certain condition a few months ago, poor child, but everything's blown over now thank heavens. I can't bear to think of some of these poor kids getting a lot of mud slung at them because they want to behave like the Almighty meant them to. After all if a man's beast enough to let a girl down—well, I'd better not start talking about it. It drives me mad as a rule. Then their babies, going through life with names practically snatched from grave stones just because a mealy mouthed padre didn't mumble a few words over a wedding ring. And talking about padres, there's that most *awful* creature Lexington. Really I've never come across anything so horrible as him, not even in all my nightmares after beef steak and kidney pie. His morals stink and he's the biggest hypocrite the Lord created. I'm told he carries on in secret with these bazaar women. Isn't honest enough for anything else."

The Reverend Lexington was indeed an unprepossessing figure. Fat and oily looking, he went round the room washing his hands and bowing. When he came to us I noticed that his eyes were bulging and expressionless, like a cow's—or maybe a fish's. They flickered over us with remarkable lack of fixity, lingering on Susan longest. I felt my gorge rise. His voice had the peculiar sing-song brand of the pulpit and was somewhat nasal.

"Aha!" he said. "Newcomers to Fyzabad! We'll expect to see you at chapel tomorrow. You know, so few people

come to my chapel. I'm always telling them there's something comforting about God, about being near to Him and feeling His presence even if it is only through such humble vessels as myself."

He passed on with a tightlipped smile that yet showed dirty, broken teeth. Mrs. York bristled and said loudly, "Malcolm, give me a drink of your whisky quick! There's a bad taste in my mouth after that." She glared after the fat figure of the purveyor of the holy word of God and muttered darkly, "I wouldn't mind sacrificing him at his altar. He'd look pretty handsome with his throat cut."

Looking at Susan I suddenly noticed that she was hardly taking any notice at all of our hostess. Her gaze kept wandering to the three main doors of the dance room. Black unreasoning jealousy welled up in me. The past few days had been a nightmare.

"You seem preoccupied," I said to Susan. "Waiting for someone? Present company dull?"

"Of course she's waiting for someone," chuckled Mrs. York. "Peter Chambers. But I know by instinct, Mr. Mannerling, she'll never let you down. It's just that they went through so much together when they escaped from Malaya."

I realised I had no right to Susan. But it would be nice to know for my own information where I stood.

"Why don't you go out and sit on the lawn for a while dear?" I asked her. "You're looking a bit done up. A spot of fresh air would do you good. She's not been feeling too well today," I explained to Mrs. York, who clucked in a motherly manner and asked why we hadn't told her so before. Susan got up after a few seconds and left the room. I waited a short while and then excused myself as well saying, "I'll soon be back." I had a feeling I would find them in the pavilion. I did, and they were in each others arms. I went down to the river for a walk along its silent banks. It seemed the best place to go.

Somewhere across the scrub, on the fringe of the jungle, charcoal burners had started a fire. Or perhaps it was the funeral pyre of some unfortunate—or fortunate—Hindu. Its red glow reflected my feelings. So they had loved each other in Malaya. Had probably carried on a beautiful liaison behind Paul Mannerling's back. How had they loved? Like Paolo and Francesca? Had they abandoned themselves to the passion that seized them? I could picture them together, her pale transparent beauty and his brown rugged strength dominating it, claiming it for his own. I could see their eyes looking into each other, cloudy and dreamy with love, their lips moist with kissing. My God, did one have to bear this?

This kaleidoscope of maddening eroticism? Why was it that when my twisted soul clamoured for beauty it was clamped in the stocks of ugliness? How often had Chambers looked down at Susan as I had looked that first night we were together? How often had he reached those tiny feet, unhindered by the hospitality of any big blundering Mrs. York?

Gradually cold commonsense doused my fury. This was different, I tried to persuade myself, to Marianne. Marianne had belonged to me. We had married. "Not for love" had been her stipulation and I had agreed, ruthlessly confident that I could win her love by one of two methods—gentleness or force. Both had failed. But Susan was not mine to love or hate or kill. And apart from the folly of this trip, and her jocose words suggesting that we should pose as a married couple, there had been no indication by Fate or by her that we would ever be anything but friends.

I could do nothing but let events take their course. She would probably want to leave for Bombay soon, later to marry Chambers. But how was she going to erase the belief that we were married? Had she told Chambers about our foolish temporary pose? Yes, it was ten chances to one that she had, I thought. But if she had, how had he taken it? Any way, it remained to be seen what would happen. I made my way back to the club room. Susan and Chambers were already there, dancing. My golden charm seemed to have deserted me.

\* \* \*

Next morning Susan dropped the thunderbolt at the breakfast table. I can see Mrs. York's large mouth gaping as clearly today as then. Mr. York raised his eyebrows but did not offer any comment.

"I must tell you both," said Susan in a low voice, "that John and I are not married. We are not in love. He is a dear friend. As Mr. York knows, he assumed that we were married when we came up here to find out about my grandparents' house. We thought it would be fun to let the mistake continue for a while! It's all rather stupid and hard to explain. We didn't seem to stop to think of consequences."

There was a short silence, during which our host and hostess appeared to be trying to gather their wits. As for me, I was busy realising that Susan had cut the ground from under my feet. At last Mrs. York spoke, more gently than I had ever heard her.

"I understand. I thought there was something funny under the surface—ever since I saw John's bed of blankets

on the floor that first night you were here—the night of the storm." She shrugged her shoulders. "I've a broad mind. I thought maybe you loved each other—well—that way. I thought you might be pretending you were married so that marriage would not lose its beauty. Some people do, you know. They make perfect lovers for their lifetime, if they are not tied to each other for life."

She paused and suddenly busied herself with the teapot.

"The thing is, how the hell are we going to undo the impression we've already created in Fyzabad? Have you told Peter, Susan?"

Susan nodded. She could not meet my eyes for some reason. There should have been no reason. She was not beholden to me in any way.

"Well, the only thing I can see for it is for you to get away from Fyzabad as quickly as possible and let things blow over. People quickly forget. Besides, you might never see any of them again anyway."

"People would not easily forget the vivid contrast of a lovely woman married to a hideous cripple," I snapped bitterly.

There was another silence. Susan glanced at me reproachfully. Mr. York eased the tension.

"John's right," he said. "Personally I think the best way out of it is for me or Vera to publicly announce it. We can say you did it as a bet with someone in Bombay. And that we, old acquaintances of yours—thank heavens no one knows we were strangers!—were to be guarantors for your proper behaviour as unmarried folks! How does that sound?"

"I think it would be believed," said Mrs. York thoughtfully. "Yes, why not? There would be no question of subterfuge—no point in supposing it. The very fact of the whole thing being publicly announced as a joke would nullify suspicion that there was anything underhanded about it. After all, if two people wanted to carry on together in a station they would just carry on and no one would know anything about it."

It was patent that she understood about Peter Chambers. I knew she would engineer things smoothly. And for a moment disliked her for her sentiments.

Later, when Mr. York had left for his office and Mrs. York had set about her housework I asked Susan to come for a stroll down to the club.

"We'll talk things over," I said in as commonplace a tone as I could manage. "Everything's sort of become upset of a sudden, hasn't it?"

She took my arm and squeezed it, saying softly, "I'm terribly sorry John. It's only when I look at your expression now and hear that miserable note in your voice that I realise what a little pig I've been."

"Good lord, you're barking up the wrong tree." I muttered, smiling, I knew, twistedly. "After all, you didn't encourage me. If I do feel more for you than as a friend, that's just my bad luck, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I suggested all this nonsense about posing as husband and wife. I don't know why. I—I think I liked you terribly much, John, and wanted to feel how it would be to be at least called your wife for a short time."

"That's new to me," I said. We had reached the river's edge. The sun had not as yet gathered its full strength. A pleasant breeze blew across the water, sending ripples curling in towards the shore.

"It's true." She whispered, almost as if not believing herself.

"You thought Chambers was dead?"

She paused a few seconds before replying.

"Yes."

"You love him?"

"I do."

"Tell me about him Susan."

"There's been a queer look in your eyes since he came John. I think you hate him."

I laughed contemptuously and kicked at an empty tin that some urchin must have left at the water's edge. It splashed into the river and sank drunkenly.

"Nonsense," I said. "I'm just curious. I'd like to know that he'd make you happy. That's all. How long were you in love with him? Please don't lose your temper at my questioning. Take it as the efforts of a friend who can't bear to think that you ever will be unhappy."

"Of course not, John. I think I know how you feel. I knew him for some time and I think I loved him all the time—as I told you, I never loved my husband. I loved his cousin. But Peter was one of those shy sort—would never have proposed to me unless I had led him by the hand. And a woman feels that a man will not respect her if she does

that. Besides, he used to worship Paul and that was why, in my opinion, he never tried to encroach on what he felt was Paul's. But it's all a longish story. I'll tell it to you some day."

"Not this morning?"

"It's too long. Besides, the horror of those few days, and Paul's crazy obstinacy....." she stopped speaking and looked out over the water where a native, clad only in a loin cloth, was poling a twenty foot boat across to the far shore. Another man was curled up at the helm. The craft was bleached by the action of sun and water and the brown bodies of its crew were shining with sweat engendered not so much by effort as by the heat. Turbanless, the punter's movements leisurely and unhurried, they seemed to whisper across the water of the spirit of India.

## CHAPTER VIII

I WONDER which of you, my readers, could judge the depth of my feelings at this stage. How would any of you have behaved if you had been in my place? If I have given you a true picture of things, I am sure you would find it difficult to answer. For, ninety-nine chances to one, you are not a cripple and no two human beings' minds are moulded on the same lines anyway.

Your fictional and movie hero or chief character would probably step nobly out of the picture, perhaps blowing his brains out to add colour and a nasty mess to the whole affair, regardless of the misery he would cause to the woman he professed to love. Or he may gaily laugh and indulge in light chit chat in her presence and busy himself in public life in order to make it very obvious to the woman concerned that he was heart-broken but was managing to live it all down. Or he would swear himself her best friend and patiently wait till her husband died of natural causes or the woman got tired of her husband and turned to him (your fictional hero) for solace both spiritual and physical with a few soothing drinks at the local club thrown in now and again for good measure. Or he might murder her husband, make it look like suicide, and achieve his object that way. On the other hand he might sit down and sensibly wonder if a woman was worth so much trouble anyway. He might remind himself that woman merely consisted of a head—which sometimes contained a brain—a body endowed with attractive qualities which often came under the term beauty, such as well developed, rounded arms and legs, well shaped breasts, curving hips—and sometimes a soul. He might argue that the number of such women in the world was sufficient to preclude the necessity of his making himself miserable over one in particular.

Or, as a human being in real life, he might think of a simple plan, like I did. He might say to himself. "This straight bodied young Adonis commands my woman's love because of his straight body and strength. She came near

loving me. *So why not bring his body to level terms with mine?* Let us start neck to neck, like horses in a race, and see who crosses the finishing line first. *Reductio ad absurdum.*

I remembered a man I knew, one Ram Roy Chaudhry, who lived in Bombay and who, for the right monetary recompense, would be only too willing to do my bidding. Chaudhry was one of the biggest scoundrels I had ever come across. He used to be engaged for quite a considerable time in dope running from Singapore to Java, a pastime which brought him an appreciable fortune but which at the same time rendered him comparable, in the minds of some Malays, to the lowest *orang puteh*s they had had in their country. An incident and an angry Malay had at one time almost put his neck on the wrong side of a noose. It was, fortunately for him, at that critical period in his life that I met him. I managed to smuggle him to Calcutta by way of Rangoon, doing part of the journey in a sampan, something deep within me telling me that he would prove useful to me some day. That was three years ago and I had only met him twice in that time. I suspected that he was mixed up in some extensive fifth column activities but neither I nor the police would ever be able to pin any definite proof of crime to his spotless shirt and dhoti. A devout worshipper of Subhas Chandra Bose and his creed of violent resistance to "British Imperialism" and "Capitalism" he yet conducted his worship subtly, with one eye to his safety and the other dividing its sly glance between eventual power on the side of his hero if he won through, or respect as a good British Indian citizen if the British Raj continued to fly its flag in the country. He would hold forth for long minutes on end on his favourite subject during those two meetings of ours and on the journey from Malaya to Calcutta.

Ram Roy Choudhry, I knew, had a special cellar below his house where he conducted his pro-Subhas Bose anti-British meetings. Might we not somehow manage to inveigle Chambers into that cellar one day? It all depended, of course, on whether Chambers' work ever took him to Bombay and we were placed in a suitable enough position to deal with him. Ram Roy Chaudhry would probably be only too glad to maim the boy at my request and to my specifications. I had not the strength or I might have endeavoured to carry out that plan myself here, in Fyzabad, disguised as some sort of native thug. But I suddenly realised I was thinking like a fool.

That evening, at the Club, I received a shock. For there, entering the room, just as York was going to announce, to the quite appreciable number present, the fake attached to

Susan's "marriage" to me, was Portland, fat, sweating, grinning Portland, his wolfish teeth showing gruesomely between his red sensual lips. What a story this would make for him and Sheridan! Traill passing off in Fyzabad as Susan's husband when he was supposed to be in Delhi calling on his publishers!

When he saw me the smile left his face like lightening and his jaw dropped. Then he swiftly recovered himself and came over to us as York made his announcement. There was dead silence in the room for a few moments. They were tense moments, fraught with the spirit of scandal. Then the elderly Mrs. Granger burst out in a particularly deep voice, "How extraordinary! Good heavens, it reads like a novel!"

And that was the signal for excited chatter and laughter throughout the room. Whether Susan and I were henceforth branded (enviously) as "those two lived in sin, my dear—what do you think of it?" or whether the whole thing would soon be forgotten it was hard to say. I was glad the Reverend Lexington was not present for I am sure he would have taken some angle that would have necessitated my trying to strike him.

Portland's snuffling voice insinuated itself through the general buzz of conversation in our little group.

"So you two have won your bet!" he said loudly obviously so that others could hear too. "Well, well—it just goes to show how we fat men of business can be mistaken." He raised a hand for silence and faced the room. "Folks, you may be interested to hear that I have just come from Bombay.....in time to hear about the loss of five hundred rupees to each of these bold friends of mine! I heartily and publicly congratulate them—Mrs. Mannerling and Mr. Traill—on their confounded nerve. I never thought they could do it."

One or two young officers cheered him and the room rapidly returned to normal. Peter Chambers, clad in the uniform of a pilot officer of the Royal Air Force, clasped Portland's hand warmly.

"You're a brick, sir," he said. "I'm sure Fate must have brought you here tonight! These small towns can be darned narrow minded about certain things." His keen young eyes leapt back to Susan's shining face. Portland grinned even more broadly, the ghastly process indicating only to me how chagrined he suddenly was at finding this fresh obstacle in the way of his pursuit of what passed for him as the acme of happiness.

"This is Peter Chambers," I said with spiteful satisfaction. "He and Susan are practically engaged. They met in Malaya."

That would make him grin a bit more. But perhaps later on he and I could put our heads together and work out a better plan than the one in which I had included brief thoughts of Ram Roy Chaudhry. Mrs. York, who had receded somewhat unfamiliarily into the background during all the excitement, suddenly came out of her shell again. Watching her cheerful expression as she looked at Portland I wondered whether she disliked or liked him. A shrewd judge of people according to her own hinting, she had undoubtedly proved herself misguided in her liking for me. Unless of course, she never *had* liked me. It was hard to get behind that broad bland face of hers and her chatter.

"By the way, where are you putting up?" she asked Portland.

"Well, at the moment in the waiting room at the station," he replied. "Thought I'd stay there till I could look round the place."

"Here on business?" asked Mr. York, his small round dry face bearing an expression that baffled me. It was neither one of like nor dislike, welcome nor rejection. You have to live with Portland some little time to gauge him.

"Well, yes, after a fashion," he replied, sticking his short fat fingers into the pockets of his white duck trousers. "I've been lately thinking of retiring and have been searching for a suitable spot in which to settle. You know—cheap living and peace and quiet and all the rest of it, with a climate that is fairly dry and has a good winter. Can't stand Bombay's mugginess."

What a consummate liar he was! He had stated his intention of visiting Fyzabad as soon as he thought Susan was settled in. What had been his designs? And how near had she been to destruction? Perhaps it would never be possible to say.

"Well, you must come and stay with us," invited Mrs. York, "while you have that look round. It's many a year since I had the thrill of putting up so many people!"

Peter Chambers and Susan were chatting eagerly a little way from us. I thought I would seize the opportunity of going outside and cooling my frenzied brain. Everything seemed to be wrong with the world. I know that if I had had an axe or a knife and were to release my hold on my nervous control for but one second, I would shock the Happy Valley Club by committing, before its very eyes, at least two murders.

As I left the verandah I thought Mrs. Lyons passed me, clad in her swimming costume, a towel over her shoulders. I could not mistake her frizzy looking hair in the glow of light that emanated from the building. She seemed to walk hurriedly, angrily, stamping heavily on the pathway with the wooden soled slippers the Club issued for bathers. She whisked into the door that led to the ladies' changing room. I walked on slowly towards the swimming pool from where the splash of a dive could be clearly heard. I wondered idly who or what had made the estimable young Mrs. Lyons angry. Was it her knobbly kneed husband? Or perhaps the very able Ronnie Gibson? I had noticed neither inside the Club. And then, as I drew nearer the pool across the soft turf of the lawn, obviously unheard, I realised that it was quite possible that it had been neither one nor the other of these men who had upset her. It could have been the contrast between the two. The sorry thought of her weak kneed husband compared to the glowing ones of Ronnie who dived and swam and did everything, apparently, with the debonair dash and consummate skill of a movie hero. She probably fumed impotently because she had met the wrong one first. I stopped as I heard Lyons' toneless, rather whining voice.

"By gad Ronnie, I wish I could manage this diving and swimming business like you! It surely seems to count a lot with Anne!"

The reply was that of your typical egotist.

"There's nothing in it really old man. And you're right, it does get the women! They seem to like to see a chap cutting through the air and water. Sort of takes them back instinctively to the old cave dweller days I suppose."

There was a splashing and blowing as, apparently, he clambered out of the water. I could distinctly hear his bare feet pattering wetly along the cement sides of the pool. The next second my blood froze, as it had done when I had watched the life spurting from the gaping throat of the half breed labourer I had killed in Batavia and when I had gazed down at the dead body of poor Marianne. My queer instinct told me I was in the presence of Death, even before the ensuing events and words proved it.

There came the sound of a grunt and a dull thud, blending almost simultaneously, then a splash. As one in a dream I listened to the lifeless voice of Arthur Lyons muttering in a sort of chanting, subdued monotone.

"Not so bloody impressive now, are you, you bastard? Not swimming like a golden fish now, eh? Golden fish! Bah! In a few minutes you'll be dead. And no one will

ever know I killed you. Just think of that, Ronnie. Drowned, you will be, killed by a strange twist of Fate, knocked unconscious as you stepped, jumped and slipped on your beloved diving board! And me, poor ineffectual, unimpressive fool, with my bony knees and chicken heart, actually unable to save you! There'll be no suspicion attached to the bump on your head. For I was cunning, Ronnie, very cunning. I covered a flat piece of wood with the same sort of coir matting as they put on diving boards so that any marks on your scalp will correspond with the matting on the diving board. Simple, isn't it? I'll bury the wood now my friend. And they'll bury you tomorrow early, before your golden body begins to smell. My God—am I talking aloud? What a fool I am. Anyone might....."

His voice broke off and I heard his bare feet pattering along the edge of the pool and saw the pale bulk of his half naked body come within three yards of me. I edged back into the shadow of the jacaranda tree and the bushes near it. Apparently he had been well prepared and had had a hole dug ready to conceal his cunningly simple weapon for after a brief scraping of earth with his feet under one of the bushes he climbed back on to the edge of the pool and seemed to wait. He was taking no chances. And obviously Fate was on his side, for no one else seemed inclined to bathe tonight. It must have been fully twenty minutes before he splashed into the water, apparently to wash the mud from his feet and then made as fast as he could go for the Club house, shouting at the top of his voice as he went.

"Ronnie's drowning! Help! Help all of you there in the club! For God's sake get a move on."

I faded into the shadows and came up with the hindmost of the frantic people from the Club. In my heart was the deepest admiration for this ineffectual, foolish looking young man who bore out my constant belief that one never knew what the person was who stood next to one anywhere, at any time. How simple was his plan. How utterly convincing was his story as he told it. How perfectly the pathetic dead body of Ronnie Gibson verified that story.

A couple of the young officers worked frantically on him, trying to resuscitate him. But all their efforts proved futile. The gasping, whispering group of people crowding round the edge of the pool shuffled and broke into unreal staccato sounds of horror as one of the young men stood up and muttered "It's no good. He's dead."

I remember the whimper of Anne Lyons as her husband led her away. I'll remember his hoarse voice as he repeated what he had already told them all.

"My God, Anne, I'm terribly ashamed of not having been able to save him. It's a bloody rotten feeling. I'm such a ninny. He was going to try one of those double somersault dives and somehow misjudged in the bad light. The diving board caught him a nasty crack and he disappeared into the water. I thought maybe he was keeping under for a few seconds to recover. Then when he didn't come up I began to get alarmed. I jumped in and floundered about but you know what an utter poop I am in the water. I think I lost my head altogether then and I don't know how long I struggled and splashed and tried to swim under water to find him. I suddenly realised I was being less than useless and rushed for the Club. Oh curse it, *curse my flabby body!* I wish to God I'd never been born!"

They went off towards the club room, Anne Lyons sniffing audibly and he muttering inconherently. I could picture his lank straw coloured hair hanging down into his weak looking eyes.

They buried Ronnie Gibson next day—early—as Arthur Lyons had told him they would. Before the tropical heat could affect his soulless frame.

## CHAPTER IX

*The Garden called Gethsemane,  
It held a pretty lass,  
But all the time she talked to me  
I prayed my cup might pass.....  
It didn't pass—it didn't pass—  
It didn't pass from me.  
I drank it when we met the gas  
Beyond Gethsemane !*

(*Gethsemane* by Rudyard Kipling.)

PORLAND moved in with me next day. We shared one of the east rooms of the York's rambling house. I remembered his talk of offering Susan a job as Manageress of the Blue Heaven Restaurant, one of his smarter resorts. The place didn't have a worse name than any other super smart dive in the city, or in any city for that matter. People had been known to whisper that if you so wished it you could "get your change upstairs" at any of the Portland Blues, but no concrete proof had ever been offered, either first or second hand, that any such state of affairs existed. The girls who worked there, both as waitresses and dancing partners, were pretty and attractive and to all intents and purposes virtuous.

I wondered if it would not be better to let him deal with her in his own way—or Sheridan too for that matter—rather than let my soul eat itself out planning the crippling of Susan's lover or the destruction of Susan herself. But the thought was revolting. Although Peter Chambers was now a concrete obstacle, I would rather kill her myself than let either of them win her body or soul. I realised that they, like me, might win her love and respect. That the effect of her personality and trust might inspire them as strangely as it had and did inspire me, imposing on them unaccustomed restraint.

"What did you hope to gain by coming here?" I asked Portland coldly after breakfast as he sat skimming through the morning paper.

"About as much as you," he returned cheerfully. "I don't know what you actually got but it couldn't have been much more than a raspberry judging from the look of things—and that young Air Force chap. Clever move of yours, that trip to see your publishers at Delhi! No luck at all with our charming Susan? I mean, you haven't even had a chance to find out what she looks like *in puris naturalibus*, have you?"

"Something like that would naturally enter your head, wouldn't it?"

"Of course. We're all human. Even you with your physical troubles. Now, now! Don't start losing your temper. I'm merely stating a fact. And when one arrives just in time to hear that a man's been living with her as her husband—well—what do you expect one to think? Those fools might have swallowed it at the Club. But not your dear Gerald. Come on now, Traill, unload. Can she love or cant she? And what is it like to wake up in the morning and....."

"Look here Portland," I said through my teeth, "you'd better shut up or I won't hold myself responsible for my actions."

Portland did not know about Marianne or the half breed labourer in Batavia but the look in my eyes must have convinced him that I felt something deeper than mere peevishness. He put the newspaper down and said placatingly, "All right, all right. No need to get your shirt off old man. But you must admit things looked a bit queer. I did what I did too, to....."

"You put over a bluff about the bet so as to insinuate your marvellous personality on Susan's mind," I cut in. "To make her think what an utter gentleman you were to so quickly size up the situation and clear her name—or help to clear it. Do you think I thought you did it for me, you fat fool?"

At that moment there was a knock on the door, and, opening it, Portland admitted Susan and young Peter Chambers, the latter looking extremely smart in his uniform and Susan seeming, I thought, somewhat crestfallen.

"Peter's off this afternoon," she said. "So I thought I'd bring him round to say au revoir."

"Off?" I questioned, hardly able to keep the eagerness out of my tone. "Where?"

"Burma," he supplied the information. "Things are not looking so good there. There's about eight hundred of us moving—but I shouldn't be mentioning that!"

I found my eyes wandering again over his straight, strong young body. He was indeed what anyone could term without exaggeration "a young God." Was it any wonder that Susan loved him? But might she not be persuaded to think differently once he had gone? Then again, might he not be shot down and killed by some ravaging Jap heathen? What a fool I had been to think of Ram Roy Chaudhry when there were so many millions of Japanese on the eastern front! The whole thing was merely a matter of waiting.

We said goodbye to the boy and Portland's handshake was particularly warm and effusive.

"I'll be going to see him off," said Susan. "He's going by train as there are no planes available. You two can come along if you feel like it." But there was that in her tone that begged us not to. Portland was as quick to notice it of course as I.

"We've got a spot of work to do, I'm afraid," he said with his peculiarly odious snuffle. "Traill's publishers sent him some urgent proofs along to Bombay which I brought up with me."

When they had left I sneered at him, "Quick thinker, aren't you?"

"Effect produced to be utilised at some future date," he returned nonchalantly.

\* \* \*

That evening I called on Mr. Christopher Bishop. He was extremely pleased to see me. Within half an hour he was eagerly showing me certificates he had received from the Principals of various schools for the cinema shows he had given to the pupils under them. But it was only when he began showing me stacks of photographs of young school-girls from the age of about five to twelve that he really began to talk. He could tell me the name of each child, her characteristics, likes and dislikes, and when he had taken the photograph. Each one of them was "a sweet little thing" to him.

"Believe me, Traill," he said after we had seen the picture of an extremely charming little lass of eleven or so, "I love children. I'd do anything for them."

"But I notice you confine your affection to the girls," I said with a smile. I did not intend to hurt him, but was curious. I remembered what Mrs. York had said about him. His face fell almost comically, his tongue pushing against the back of his lips with the peculiar circular motion I had noticed on the tennis courts when we had first been introduced to him.

"Well," he replied, "I did have a lot of photographs of young chaps but I lost them on one of my trips. I tour the whole of India you see, showing my films, and it is easy to mislay parts of one's luggage."

"Of course, of course," I said. "Have you ever thought of getting married?" I smiled encouragingly at him for he seemed to be trembling. "I should think, with your love of children....."

A look of alarm filled his eyes as they dropped to the level of my neck. I had noticed this peculiar bashfulness of the eyes too at our first meeting. He laid a hand on my arm and I marvelled at the fine tracery of veins that marked it.

"There's something about women that makes me unhappy," he said in a voice that had gone suddenly bleak. "They always seem to be laughing at me. Years ago, when I was a child....." here he stopped and seemed to think better of what he had been about to say.

"Yes, go on," I urged him. I did not really know why I had come to see him. There seemed to have been no real reason unless it was that I had wanted to get away from Portland and had remembered at random Bishop's invitation at the tennis courts to come and see him. But as he replied I realised that Fate had sent me here. There was no doubt about that. The man opposite me looked into my eyes for a brief moment and then down again at my neck.

"You look the kind of man who would understand how I felt and how I feel," he said. "Yes, I'm going to confide in you. Please don't breathe a word to anyone, will you?"

"Good heavens, of course not," I answered, now half regretting having persuaded him to go on at all. It seemed obvious that he was going to come out with some pathetic story that would be but the figment of a diseased imagination.

"As a child," he said, the words coming with a rush, "I killed my nurse. I was seven at the time and she must have been about seventeen, a young woman with wonderful colouring and shining eyes, well made and always singing. I happened to be terribly friendly with the little girl next door, who was about eight. My nurse seemed appallingly jealous of this fact. I really cannot explain this. Then one day I found out why. I didn't understand it then and I don't really understand it now, although I know it existed. She was giving me a bath this Sunday and suddenly she began kissing me passionately and pressing my furiously angry body to hers. I have never been so angry or so frightened in my life. My screams brought my mother rushing into the bathroom. And I only saw my nurse once again. That was when she was packing up to go. As she stooped down

to put a garment in a suitcase, looking reproachfully at me, I stuck my pen-knife in her throat."

His pathetic voice died away and he picked up his album of pictures. When he went on I found that there was a peculiar lump in my throat.

"So you killed her?"

"Yes. There's something about a woman—well, they seem to cause such a lot of trouble. When they're small they're sweet and innocent. If any woman went out of her way to make me unhappy again—really unhappy—I know I would kill her without the slightest compunction. But they seem to keep away from me, thank God. I know what they think about me," a wan smile flickered across his pale, blue veined face. "But I don't mind them thinking it. I'm happier that way."

As I walked home his bleak colourless voice seemed to ring in my ears. "*If any woman went out of her way to make me really unhappy again I know I would kill her without the slightest compunction.*"

I remembered Marianne. And the labourer who had laughed at my infirmity in Batavia. They at least, I said as a sop to my conscience, according to their lights, had been frank with me, but had Susan? There had been a feeling in her heart for me. But that first night we spent together in Mrs. York's house there had been fear in her eyes when I had moved towards her. If I had tried to kiss her I know she would have screamed as my twisted, distorted face neared hers. The desire for beauty that clamoured at the portals of my soul would have been shattered into fragments that would have re-erected themselves on a foundation of hate. The thought is as good as the deed they say. Her Greek God of a lover had come along and my hideousness and the bizarre attraction it might have held for her had receded into the background.

A confused roaring seemed to fill my head for a moment as I entered the gate of the York's bungalow and saw Susan in the garden, standing and looking at a rose bush with its lovely blooms. She looked lovely. Every cell in my body called for her now that I knew it would be impossible to ever have her, every portion—if such portions there be, of my soul. But I knew she was beyond my reach for ever. Have you ever experienced that dread feeling, dear reader? It eats into one's soul, does it not, and leaves one frantic with a sense of maddening impotency. So near and yet so far—

what agony of mind is not expressed in those simple, mundane words !

I walked towards Susan, the roaring in my ears suddenly gone.

" Care for a walk by the river Susan ? " I asked and was surprised to find my voice normal. " I know how rotten you must be feeling because Peter's gone."

She looked up and smiled. There were tears on her cheeks.

" I'd love to," she said and we walked off down the drive. The cooing of doves and the cry of the koel seemed to fill the evening. A monkey made faces at us from a giant mango tree. From across the river as we reached it came the distant beat of tom-toms. Twilight made the river and the three boats visible on it grey and ghostly.

We walked along the river banks in silence, hand in hand. The lapping water fascinated me. I thought of the weak kneed, ineffectual Arthur Lyons. I thought of Marianne. And of that unfortunate labourer in Batavia. A sort of kaleidoscope whirred before my mind's eye. Far down the river bank a belated and solitary dhobi swung a garment rhythmically over his shoulder and down on to a board sticking out from the river's bank.

" Susan," I said suddenly, knowing that before darkness fell completely she would be floating down the river, dead, " Susan—may I kiss you—just once ? "

I expected to see terror and that same fear in her eyes that I had seen before. It was not there. Instead there was a tender cloudy look that seemed to have its being in some mysterious past and not in the present. The dream persisted. Her lips were red and slightly parted as she looked into my eyes. She put her arms about me and I strained her to me, murmuring hysterically, " Susan, my darling, if you only knew how I love you ! How its burnt into my soul loving you. I've thought I'd go mad many a time ! "

I could smell the fragrance of her hair, the faint and attractive perfume of her lipstick and a delicate, intimate freshness from her red mouth itself. My lips closed on hers and the world seemed to go out, an unreal blackness that was composed of dreams. When I opened my eyes and looked at her lovely face again I expected the final expression of loathing, the final definite shrinking away from me. But

it was not there. One of her warm hands stroked my face and the tender light remained in her eyes.

"I understand John," she whispered. "I can't help loving Peter but I think I know now what it is like to love two men."

With a broken cry I released her and made my tortuous way back to my room.

As I passed in at the gate of the York's bungalow, a screech owl jeered at me and my lucky golden charm.

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## *Part Two: The Story of Gerald Portland*

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### CHAPTER X

Those enterprises are best  
which can be concealed up to  
the moment of their ful-  
filment.

*Machiavelli.*

GERALD THOMAS PORTLAND, (to give me my full name), had been, as a child and a youth, something of a spoilt darling in his family circle.

My mother had been indulgent and affectionate. Mine had been the robust, demanding sort of nature that succeeded in getting everything from this frail woman and my even frailler sisters. The law of nature seemed particularly apt to apply to me. So unbridled had been my desire to have my own way in everything that took my fancy that I even caused no small sensation in the village of Hornleigh in Somerset when I succeeded in seducing my youngest cousin—then fifteen years old—in a hayrick and, to my subsequent consternation, burdening her with child.

This would have been too much for even the most doting of mothers and mine was no exception to the rule that shrank from the side glances and titters of a small rural population. Even if Emily had said nothing about my strange behaviour, which she didn't understand at all and which, for the life of me, I couldn't understand either, there was the first-hand damning evidence of George Whitelow, who had been sowing potatoes nearby.

So I had been pushed, somewhat too unceremoniously for my liking, away from Portland Farm and out into the harsh world so that, as my mother tearfully cried after me, it would "take some of the rough corners" off me.

The world succeeded eminently in its job. It took all the rough corners off me and left me as smooth as a billiard ball.

still able to get my own way but in a manner that was unobtrusive, I might even say masterly. I went from success to success, from owning a small bicycle repair shop of my own to swindling my partner out of his share in a delightful and dividend paying road-house restaurant.

Here I flourished for some months, until, in fact, I happened to be in Southampton on business one week end and a ship's captain had pointed out a reverend looking old gentleman who, he said, was worth millions.

"Comes from India, you know," had said the captain, spitting with incredible accuracy into the bar's sole cuspidor. "Makes his money out of other peoples' souls. You know."

"Not quite," I had answered, intrigued by the thought of such a fine looking old chap making millions out of other peoples' souls. "Dope, you mean?"

"That—and other things. Women for lonely men sort of thing. Police have been after him for years but all they can succeed in doing is catching a few ghastly old women in charge of some establishments. I believe the whole thing's run strictly on the percentage basis. And nobody ever lets him down."

"How crude," I had grunted, but my opinion had regard to the employment of the "ghastly old women" rather than to the morals of the man indicated. Into my mind there entered the desire to produce some method of making millions that was not so crude. Something that would leave me possessed of my good name besides a fat bank balance. A few days' thought and an impulsive trip to the sunny shores of India after a tour of the Pacific which I had always longed to accomplish, had resulted in that excellent string of Bar-Restaurants in Bombay known as the Portland Blues. There was the Blue Heaven, the Blue Retreat, the Blue Bugle, the Blue Glade and half a dozen more that suddenly began to make Bombay life brighter than it was.

Of course there were whispers. But what did whispers matter to a man of character? To a man who knew what firm ground he stood on? My system was subtle, smoothly operated and perfect—with no shadow of wrong doing attached to it. If any girls went slightly off the rails it was no fault of mine and I was not the man to heartlessly throw her out of a job. Things like that could always be hushed up.

I made my money firstly through the age-old attraction any reasonably pretty or well-made girl has for some type of men and secondly through the natural gratitude a girl feels when she is able to marry through contacts made. Of course this natural gratitude was benignly suggested to

them by myself when they were engaged and apart from thinking me a slightly grasping fellow, I'm sure they did, with few exceptions, dub me a real good scout whose appearance unjustifiably belied his kind inner nature. And then, when the war started, I of course began to make such handsome profits on cleverly accumulated peace stocks of liquor sold at war prices that success was ensured even without marks of gratitude from my girls.

With regard to my own amours, these too I have always smoothly and subtly arranged. No hayricks now for our thriving man of business. And no need to arouse the distrust or antagonism of my girls, many of whom are even now in the habit of referring to me affectionately as "Uncle Portland" or "Uncle Gerald." It is all very touching. Yes, one can always find the right kind of woman for the right kind of love. You see them everywhere. Hard mouthed, hard eyed, ultra-smart women who speak with a drawl and think in terms of hard cash in return for their acquaintanceship and, maybe, if they feel condescending enough, what passes for their love. You see them at the dance halls, laughing and joking with their escorts, to all intents and purposes wives or sweethearts or sisters. Their mouths and the needs of their needy handbags and perhaps a bitter memory say that love does not exist anyway, that it is a clever myth created by the Almighty for the propagation of a species and nothing more. But their hearts say that maybe somewhere in the future exists a ray of hope, the "someone" who will not know what they are and who will allay their pangs for love and motherhood. That too, as a sentiment, I find touching. And a little amusing.

When I first saw Susan Mannering at the Taj Mahal Hotel my pulses quickened more than Traill and Sheridan or any of my acquaintances or lovers would ever have thought possible. I had been doing a roaring trade through women evacuees from the various theatres of war in the Far East, women abandoned or widowed or cut off suddenly and tragically from brothers, fathers and sweethearts.

But here, in this pale faced, red lipped woman, my instinct had perceived something unique, something really worth fighting for. Here was a flower amongst flowers. A perfect creation that simply cried for the fullest appreciation.

I know I am not attractive physically. But I really thought I could impress Susan Mannering from the moment I spoke to her. She looked the understanding type who would not see through bogus gentleness and chivalry. Unfortunately Traill and Sheridan are selfish brutes, especially the former, with his miserable twisted body and half crazy mind. If you could but see his right leg dragging after him, the queer

twisted muscles of his face, that draw his mouth up to one side, you would wonder how in God's name Susan Mannering found time for his company at all.

I had a slight suspicion Traill was up to something when he suddenly found he had to see his publishers in Delhi as soon as Susan had decided to try and find a house that had belonged to her grand-parents in a place called Fyzabad years ago. There's something queer about Traill. Something that makes your blood run cold at times. And—a quality I find most amusing—he seems to have certain ideals.

The three of us, Traill, Sheridan and I have lived together, strangely enough, for about four years. And people should get to know the better side of each others' inmost souls in that time. But we hardly knew anything about each other except, of course, what was dictated by superficial contact. I have never been able to see or know much below Traill's twisted queerness and Sheridan's cynical bitterness. I sometimes wonder if I even really know myself.

In spite of my suspicions however, it was something of a shock finding Traill at Fyzabad and, according to a futile sort of announcement made by a Mr. York, actually posing as Susan's husband. It seemed grotesque.

But things appeared even more hopeless for me when young Peter Chambers emerged as Susan's lover. They had met and known each other in Malaya apparently. I had to be frank with myself. The conquest of Susan's body, with or without her soul, that I had planned seemed doomed to complete failure, right from the outset. But it was when Chambers left for Burma that the road became clear again. It was obvious that without any means of income and with her brief dream of finding a home and land in Fyzabad shattered, Susan would jump at the chance of a job. I was grateful to Providence for giving me the opportunity to put my offer in before Sheridan had had time to consolidate his. She was, according to him, very keen on joining his miserable advertising firm.

Fate played even more conveniently into my hands when Traill suddenly disappeared one evening. He just packed his bags and went and neither Mrs. York nor her husband saw him go, for they happened to be at the Club. Where Susan was I do not know. Anyway, you can imagine how I felt. I do not claim to be an angel. The old Adam is strong within me. God knows it is not my fault. The thought of possessing her became an obsession with me from the moment I saw her at the Taj. And now, with apparently only Sheridan in the way, my mind became even more set in this pleasant rut. But with a girl of Susan's type one cannot

afford to be hasty. Nothing would be more disastrous than to rush her. Slow, gradual plans, with no indication of one's real thoughts or feelings, have won almost every time in cases like this.

Susan looked queer when she entered the dining room for breakfast that morning. I laid aside the morning paper with a rustle and donned my most jovial mood.

"Well, well, you're up early and bright, Mrs. Mannering!" I had not yet achieved the pleasure of calling her by her Christian name, a defect which I decided to immediately remedy. "By the way, it's such a bother tacking on a 'Mrs.' to your name and you a 'Mr.' to mine! What do you say to our being Susan and Gerald to each other from now on? Much more friendly and efficient."

She smiled rather wanly. Good lord, I thought, had Traill really affected her to the extent of making her miserable by his mysterious departure? It seemed irrational, unthinkable. And yet here were the signs. Or were they meant for Peter Chambers? Or both? I found it hard to guess. However, my chief task was to drive both of them not only from my mind but from hers as well.

"Has that crippled brute Traill been annoying you?" I burst out in spite of myself. She looked at me queerly.

"No, why do you ask?"

"We'll, you look so seedy, so, so—oh you know, down in the mouth."

"Isn't that natural?" she asked gently. "There's no need for you to suppose anyone annoyed me. And you shouldn't be so vicious about poor John's...."

I was quick to smooth her apparently ruffled feathers. She looked very desirable in that moment. I allowed the lids to cover my eyes as I spoke.

"Sorry Susan, old thing. I didn't mean anything. But you've sort of become a ward of ours you know. We feel responsible for you and your happiness."

"We?"

"Yes. Er—well, myself and I think Sheridan. And Traill, too, was always championing your cause, though he has always been rather on the lean side where any possible financial help to anyone is concerned. Now look here, I want you to be sensible and accept a darned good job I'm offering you. Five hundred a month and all found. Manageress of one of my restaurants."

She did not answer for a long time but sat looking down at her bacon and eggs, knife and fork untouched. There

was a slight frown between her lovely dark eyes. I had never seen such eyes. And the texture of her skin was enough to drive one crazy.

"Mr. Sheridan offered me a job," she said slowly at last. "It's really very good of both of you, especially you for you're offering me more than Mr. Sheridan! But I'm afraid I don't know anything about restaurant work. There....."

"Nonsense! You don't have to know anything to start with. Everyone has to learn. Good lord above, why do you let little things like that worry you? It's not the way to get on in this hard world."

"But....."

"It's good money my dear, and comfortable living. Sheridan's show is liable to go bust any day now with all his clients fading away due to the war. His is a private company and I know he is in none too secure a position. It's only one or two Government Propaganda contracts that are keeping his firm going. The war is ruining everything—everything except restaurants and hotels."

I hoped she had not noticed any extra eagerness in my bearing. But she had. Fortunately she hadn't been looking at my eyes or I'm sure she would not have connected that eagerness solely with a desire for her well-being. She laid a slim cool hand on mine. God, it set me on fire, the touch of it!

"I can never thank you enough for your kindness. I am one of the most fortunate evacuees in the country I think. Three kind people—and now even the Yorks, dear souls—trying to help me all they're worth! I don't really deserve it."

"You do, my dear. You do. It's tough on anyone when they lose everything—home, husband and—and, well, sweetheart. Oh I know you couldn't help falling for Peter. Everything in Malaya must have been so utterly ghastly too, making you rely even more on him."

"Add to that," her tone was suddenly lifeless, "the fact that I did not love my husband and you have even a further reason. But I'm babbling like a child. Let's go down to the pool for a swim." She shook her head as if to clear it of all depressing thoughts and rose from the table.

I don't swim myself but the opportunity of watching her while she did would afford me, I knew, ineffable moments of pleasure. I slipped on my sun glasses partly as a measure against the glare and partly to hide any unguarded expression that might enter my eyes.

At the pool I found it difficult to conceal my appreciation of her. It was a week day and the sun had already begun to hot up quite appreciably, and so it was not surprising that there was no one else there.

Susan's slim smooth body slipped through the pool with consummate ease, the beauty of every line of her figure accentuated to perfection by the clear rippling water. My heart ran riot as I watched her. And each time she got out of the water and passed me on her way to the diving board every nerve in me clamoured to me to take her in my arms and kiss her without heed to the future or to her own alarm. But patience has its own reward. I decided I must not spoil everything.

"You swim marvellously!" I enthused as she sat down for a moment on the bench at my side, the water dripping from her scarlet costume and creamy skin. I tried to keep my voice calm. I must have succeeded for she laughed with a slight return of her old gaiety and said, "Don't flatter me, Gerald."

By the time we got back to the York's house lunch was ready and our host and hostess were waiting for us. Mrs. York was looking thoughtful and upset. After the soup her words indicated the reason.

"I wonder what could have come over Mr. Traill," she said. "I feel so worried about him. There must have been something terrible on his mind otherwise he would never have acted like this. If Arthur Lyons hadn't been with Ronnie Gibson the night that poor lad was injured and drowned you can imagine what would have been the natural inference for Fyzabad's nit wits to draw. They would have suspected John Traill of murder! And it wouldn't have struck them that such a supposition was idiotic."

It had not struck me that way. The sudden tragedy of this Ronnie Gibson's death had taken up but a small portion of my thoughts I must confess. How could one think of Death with Susan filling one's mind?

York was unusually quiet too. Apparently Traill had made quite a conquest all round. I wondered why. The injustice of it annoyed me. Especially when I felt sure I had made no such impression. That miserable crippled monstrosity, with his moods and sudden flaring tantrums!

There was a knock at the main front door and the familiar call of the postman. Perhaps it was strange that he should come at such a moment. The York's khitnagar brought in a letter and handed it to Mrs. York who in turn passed it to Susan. "For you dear," she said.

Susan frowned at the envelope for a moment in puzzlement and then ripped it open. As she read the note tears filled her eyes. I saw the name "John" at the back of the sheet and recognised Traill's spidery handwriting. She finished reading and with a queer choking sound got up and went into her room, the note dropping to the floor. Mrs. York picked it up and with her characteristic frankness and disregard for the sanctity of other peoples' lives, read it out. I for one thought Traill sounded particularly ridiculous.

"You won't see me again," read Mrs. York in a voice suddenly surcharged with emotion. As I listened to her and to the words I felt like laughing. "There are some peaks of beauty it is impossible for the accursed to reach or even attain nearness to. That first night we met you and drove you home you quoted, I think, from Service—his 'Pilgrims'. Permit me to quote a line from 'The Mourners.'

*Nay, I but dream. The sky is all forlorn,  
And there's the plain of battle writhing red :  
God pity them, the womenfolk who mourn !  
How happy are the dead !*"

Mrs. York laid the note down.

"John," she said reflectively, a large stupid tear running down her great nose, "John Traill, I wonder what you mean by that?"

## CHAPTER XI

SUSAN announced to the Yorks that evening her intention of returning to Bombay on the morrow. They expressed keen regret, especially Mrs. York. Her large body positively drooped. A lot of the spirit I had seen glowing in her the first night we had met at the Club seemed to have been driven out of her during the past two or three days. Traill had told me in the course of conversation that she had prophesied trouble where the Lyons and Ronnie Gibson were concerned. May be she was secretly sorry that Gibson had, after all, died by accident. Add to that the upsetting news of finding she had been sheltering an unmarried couple under her roof, the sudden arrival on the scene of Peter Chambers, and the departure of Traill—and now Susan's departure—and maybe one could understand that she had good reason to feel much less than cheerful.

I of course said I would be leaving too, as there was nothing to keep me in Fyzabad. They did not appear in the least sorry about that. In fact it was an appalling shock to my self esteem to overhear Mrs. York muttering to her husband on the verandah after lunch as he prepared to return to office the following few crisp words about me :

"I can't stand the way he guzzles his food. Those queer front teeth of his are terrible too. And the way his lids half cover his eyes. And he seems to always smell of perspiration. I'm not sorry he's going, though I thought at first I might like him. But Susan oh dear, it breaks my heart. How we meet people and then part. Like ships in the night."

"Ridiculous old fool!" I snorted to myself as I made my way back to my room.

Bombay called me. And the week end trips I could still make to my house in Lonavla, the delightful hill station about 75 miles away, in the Western Ghats. Traill had an old place there too, not far from mine. It had not been purchased with his own money but had been left him by a

rich Indian, a literary friend who had had no other dependents. I called my place Blue Dell, Traill called his Bright Nook—both names perhaps reflecting the moods and lives of the owners! I wondered idly if Traill had gone off to his hill retreat. I knew he kept it permanently stocked with clothes, bedding and tinned food. It was fairly obvious that he would not be in Bombay when we got back. I for one would not tell Susan that Bright Nook existed.

I was glad when we saw the last of the Yorks disappearing into the distance. Susan was in a ladies' coupe some distance away and I amusedly watched her waving till her friends were out of sight.

Railway journeys bore me. I get tired of staring out of the window and at my fellow passengers. The latter do, if anything, form the more interesting subject for perusal and study. In my carriage on this occasion there were three priests, apparently of the Roman Catholic denomination, occupying one of the long carriage seats. I amused myself for a short time examining them. Their avocation has always intrigued me, and I never look at one of them without thinking of the Confessions of Maria Monk and Balzac's *Droll Stories*. The very idea of a monk making love to a nun has made me roar with laughter in my more unguarded moments.

One of these men was sharp featured, with a pointed, "Captain Kettleish" beard. The man in the centre of the seat was round faced and square headed, with a blue jowl. The other had close set eyes and wore horn rimmed glasses. This latter was the most striking of the three and seemed to dominate the others in the brief snatches of conversation they indulged in in a language I did not profess to even know the sound of. He had a hook nose and was slightly bald on top, and had a habit of beating time with one hand to what he was reading from his prayer book or bible or whatever it was he had in his hand.

All three of them were dressed in the long white cloak associated with their kind. All three wore open work sandals. Their khaki pith hats were in the hat rack and their prayer books held open at a convenient angle for reading. They seemed to be learning part of the books by heart for their lips would move as they read and then they would look up at the roof of the carriage and around them, apparently repeating to themselves what they had just read. A pained expression appeared, every now and then, on their faces as a fuzzy haired negroid looking woman in a corner seat sang to a fat gross looking fellow next to her. He had dark shadows under his eyes and had a habit of constantly sniffing in such a manner that one side of his thick mouth

twitched upwards along with his neat moustache. He was a peculiar slate colour, perhaps also of negro extraction. The woman, I thought, was obviously his mistress. She wore nothing on her wedding ring finger but her other black digits were covered with jewellery. An elegant gold watch adorned her left wrist, this, with beige stockings and shoes, and a modern flowered dress putting the finishing touch to a flamboyant picture. Her lips were negroid red and her eyes were a little red rimmed too. Her voice was beautiful.

When the train pulled in at Victoria Terminus Station we found the platforms bare, with the usual crowds penned behind the barriers. No one without tickets for actual travelling was allowed on the platform. This measure was due to the enormous numbers of evacuees, English, Indian and foreign, who would rush the trains as they started, causing endless trouble. There was a diversion as my three priests were suddenly approached by a Police Inspector and a group of constables of the Bombay City Police and put under arrest. I heard the negroid woman making her report. She and the man with her had followed them all the way down from the suburbs of Lahore. They had definitely planned a large-scale escape for Italian prisoners of war. We passed on through the crowds of evacuees.

"Poor creatures," murmured Susan as the coolies collected our luggage and we made for the exit. "Evacuees! No one but an evacuee knows the horror and stark bleakness behind the story of almost every bearer of that title."

I patted her shoulder understandingly. Not because I felt sorry for her or for any evacuee but because it was obviously the thing to do.

It was good to be back in Bombay. I took Susan to lunch at the Blue Heaven. I wanted to approach her again about the job. There was a glorious breeze swinging in from the sea over Marine Drive and I have never seen Madame Zhukov (my present Manageress of this particular restaurant) perform her duties in a more inspiring manner. The time seemed ripe to bring up the old question. I could say Madame Zhukov was going to retire—which in fact she was.

"Well," I said enthusiastically as we finished a delightful piece of pomfret, "here you are Susan. This is the show I want you to manage. Cute, isn't it?"

She looked round the huge place with its blue decorations. Everything blue. I have a passion for the colour. Perhaps I should explain why, though it may sound odd and a trifle scandalous here, if not brutal. The colour lived in my memory and would live there for ever, enthroned by some

mental law that perhaps a psychologist could understand better than I, because my cousin had worn a pair of delightfully blue cami-knickers in that hayrick those long years ago. I can remember looking, bemused and strangely miserable, at the torn, rather grubby lace that had run down the sides of the garment, cheaply embellishing it. I had felt profoundly sad for a moment, I remember, and had actually burst into tears. But the mood had passed swiftly. And I'm afraid I've never felt like that since.

Susan's eyes were wide. She shook her head.

"Heavens! I could never manage a place like this! I'm not capable enough."

"Madame Zhukov was not capable either—in the beginning."

"No Gerald—I really couldn't. Besides, Mr. Sheridan offered me that post in his firm first. And anyway I *can* draw. I'd feel much more at home doing something I knew how to do!"

I bit my lip. For a moment I felt like slapping her sharply across her lovely face. Then I smiled.

"As you wish. But remember, any time you need the job, it's there for you."

"You seem to employ a lot of girls."

"I do. People like to see a lot of girls about a place like this. They—the patrons I mean—eat better, dance better, spend better!"

"You're a bit of a materialist, aren't you Gerald?"

Her glance was appraising, with a slightly amused hint in it. My answer carried the conviction of a hundred repetitions.

"Well, having been prevented by a blessed weak heart from doing anything for the nation in a more physically active way I chose this method. It makes our chaps in uniform happy, makes the girls happy, gives them jobs, and sometimes even homes. Many of them marry through direct contacts made here."

She was thoughtful of a sudden, slightly depreciating.

"Tell me Gerald—it isn't true, is it—the whisper one sometimes hears about your places? I heard one or two people talking at the boarding house I stayed at when I first arrived. They hinted that—well—that some of your girls . . . ."

"Good heavens no!" I said with a short laugh. Then I assumed a grim expression. "If you ever hear anything

more like that please make a note of the person who says it. You'll be able to help me bring a libel action. People with filthy minds are bound to start that sort of talk about unusual establishments like mine. Progress and new ideas mean nothing to them. The thing is, it's unheard of in Bombay—or was till I started in business here—to have so many white girls working in restaurants. It's quite common in other eastern countries. But because it happens to occur in the mysterious, sensuous land of Ind there simply *must* be something awful attached to it. Some people make me sick!"

I adopted my most annoyed attitude and I'm sure I must have been extremely convincing, for Susan said, "It must be a terrible responsibility for you. I can see that."

"It is, believe me. And now that you're convinced, why don't you change your mind—about Sheridan's offer I mean? I tell you his firm will be going flat soon."

"I'll have to take that chance, won't I?" she smiled.

\* \* \*

Madame Zhukov is a pleasant, obliging, middle-aged woman for whom I have the highest esteem. She is a Polish-Roumanian Jew who escaped from Nazi hands by the skin of her excellent real teeth a month after they had taken Warsaw. Violently anti-Nazi, and with some ghastly memories behind her of their brutalities throughout their triumphant roll across the country, she yet had the good sense to push it all—except her anti-Nazi feelings, which were a good advertisement for the Blue Heaven—into the back of her mind and get on with a good job.

She was extremely amenable to a friendly word and a rise in pay and was possessed of an exceptionally quick wit, so quick in fact that she was one of those rare people who had the gift of being able to read one's mind almost before one began to speak on a certain subject.

It was no surprise to me therefore when she waddled up to my table that night and sat down with a heavy sigh. Susan had made some excuse about unpacking and a headache and so had not accompanied me.

"It is terrible, is it not?" stated Madame Zhukov, wagging her head sadly.

"What is terrible my love?" I asked. Totally unattractive physically she yet brightens up visibly when I dub her affectionately and insincerely thus.

"The fact that you are so much in love, so deep. No?"

"With whom, my irresistible bird of Paradise?"

"Tcha! He asks me with whom!" She stroked the somewhat heavy moustache that adorned her upper lip, her

silver bangles, which I hated almost to distraction, clattering at her wrist as she did so. "With that beautiful girl you bring for lunch today. I see your feelings sticking—what you say—sticking out a yardstick."

It was a good thing, I reflected, that all women were not so perceptive as Madame Zhukov. If they were, Susan would probably not have felt so cheerfully about my efforts for her welfare.

"You are right, my old raven," I returned. "But she . . . . ."

"Oh I know that too. That too sticks out so much. She does not love you. Obviously, my friend. You and I belong to another school. We are, what you English say?—cast in a rougher mould. We are the heavy industry—the pots of molten steel and iron. She is the delicate porcelain crucible for the laboratory. No?"

"No. But . . . . ."

"Now don't interrupt please. You will never attract her, my friend. Never. Your body is ugly. Your teeth are ugly. Your eyes are ugly. Your face . . . . ."

"Is ghastly. Oh, I know all that. And . . . . ."

"Your blood is different. Your very bones are . . . . ."

"My God, how long is this going on? Do you think you're at the Physiological School? I'll make you retire much earlier than you want to, you old croaker."

"What do I care so long as I stop you making a fool of yourself? I love you, my friend, as you well know, like a mother. Let me give you sound advice."

"Go on, go on," I muttered resignedly. Madame Zhukov cannot be stopped. Her shiny, doughy looking face was bright as she continued. Her stumpy little hands tapped out her points on the blue marble topped table. Her lips were slightly wet with the spittle of her talk.

"You are wasting your time trying to be the Uncle to her. She will never be yours like this. Never. You must use your head my friend. The delicate finesse is useless. What remains?"

She pushed her face forward significantly towards mine.

"Oh you old fool!" I snorted. "I thought of that sort of thing long ago. It would ruin everything. And I'd probably finish up in jail."

She wagged her head till I thought her earrings would fall off and abruptly signalled a passing girl for drinks.

"Beer," she said to the girl and almost in the same breath to me, "It must be done discreetly, cleverly. She must never know who you are of course. You can be—oh!—so melodramatic and wear a mask to cover your face. Yes, you must cover your teeth. They would give you away, my sweet, even in a herd of horses."

"You sound very mysterious," I growled. "What is this so different plan of yours anyway?"

"Oh it is not so different. So simple, in fact, it is. We get her to live here, my friend. I use my special knowledge of the special white powder in the coffee or Jacques uses his hypodermic. She begins to lose spirit. She does not care what happens so long as she is not bothered mentally. You come and see her, the mysterious stranger with the mask and the heart of gold—and fire. You love her. Perhaps you possess her. We take the photographs of her in the most charming *deshabille*. No?"

I looked at her with, I know, admiration in my glances. It was admiration for her nerve, not for recounting this melodramatic, "penny dreadful" plan.

"And then I'd be so happy," I sneered suddenly, "behind the bars. For abduction and indecent assault."

"No, no, my friend. Not abduction. She must come here of her own free will. It need only be for a week. Or may be a fortnight. For her health. The breeze from the sea. You understand? And after her stay she can go. She won't know any better. If her mind does work at all she will be convinced that some sudden, hidden desire for evil influenced her so strongly, too strongly for her will. Oh I know my white powder, my friend! And, if you so wish it after that, you can for ever prevent her from, what you say, from belonging to another by the so excellent but revealing photographs you hold!"

"My God, you *are* a monstrosity!" I breathed. "But she would never allow herself to live here anyway. She's independent. She's got a job with my friend. With Mr. Sheridan."

Madame Zhukov suddenly seemed to become deflated. Her fat shoulders sagged. Her expression was one of a child whose plan for playing Red Indians had suddenly been shattered by his mother's call for lunch.

"Oh," she grumbled, "in *that* case! Why did you not tell me first? I thought she was alone, that she is without money, that she is an unfortunate refugee like me."

## CHAPTER XII

"HEARD the news?" Sheridan asked me next morning at breakfast. "Rangoon's fallen."

"That's been expected for a few days, hasn't it?" I returned. I must confess that my strongest interest in the war is the large number of Horner's Steel Shares I hold. The war in the East had lately been steadily pushing their value up. "By the way, I've been meaning to ask—has Traill returned yet?"

"From Delhi? No. The servant says he hasn't come near the place."

I realised that he was unaware of Traill's presence in Fyzabad. When I told him he chuckled in an ugly way.

"So. You two been having a good time while poor old Advertising Advice and Service slaved! Interesting. Never thought Traill had it in him. Susan didn't tell me."

"She's probably too interested in her work."

"Yes, maybe she is. She started this morning. And she can draw. Well worth the salary. And well worth my trying to make her like me. I think I can succeed. Time accomplishes everything."

"Even the destruction of apparently flourishing businesses," I smiled back at him spitefully.

"Yes, and even the death of fat, stinking chunks of flesh like you," he returned indelicately. There's something about Sheridan, like there is about Traill, that is startling. May be it is the contrast between his crude bitterness and his neatly cut clothes and perfect grooming. I don't know.

"How long do you think she'll stay with you?" I asked bitingly. "Do you think she won't start packing her traps as soon as you start trying to get too nice? I tell you she loves a boy in the Air Force. He went out to Burma from Fyzabad."

The reply came with another ugly chuckle.

"He's probably dead now."

"Besides, I'm not so sure she hasn't a really soft spot in her heart for that bounder Traill."

"Don't be ridiculous! Pshaw! Traill! I've never heard anything so fantastic in my life. Why, the very sight of him should be enough to damp any woman's sexual instincts for ever."

"You weren't in Fyzabad, my friend!"

He grunted and went back to the reading of his paper. I could not help but realise that he was a striking figure of a man with his neat clothes and his lean sardonic features. His peculiarly shaped head, with the short strong neck, added to his impressiveness. His steel grey eyes and the scar on the left side of his scalp combined with a neat moustache to give him a soldierly look. He pushed his plate aside and threw the paper on the table, saying as he rose.

"You haven't been doing too badly yourself, my fat friend! Susan is full of your goodness. Ha! Ha! It makes me laugh. By God, if people only knew what scum you are under that 'Uncle Gerald' exterior! The world's a nasty place."

His tone infuriated me. Sheridan can be so coolly cutting and yet you can never really get your own back on him. Whatever you say passes him by. He just doesn't absorb it if he doesn't want to.

"A nasty place with cynical licentious brutes like you knocking about in it," I retorted, feeling somewhat childish. Sheridan makes one utter childish retorts and feel childish afterwards, somehow. There's a sort of self satisfied, knowing all efficient air about him that makes me feel, in spite of one's self, that one is not much of a fellow anyway looked at this from all angles.

"Oh go and cut yourself a slice of your sickly Blue Icing," he sneered and left the room. Sometimes I take infinite pleasure in imagining what I would do to Sheridan were he and I alone on a desert island—and he at my mercy.

As I was deciding to make a round of my restaurants and drop in on Susan at Sheridan's office on my way back the 'phone rang in the sitting room. It was Parker, my broker, on long distance from Calcutta. His voice was frantic with excitement.

"Horner's have risen another three points!" I could hear the gasp in his voice distinctly. The news staggered me but the first shock left me cool, and determined to hang on.

"Hold them till they've risen another three," I instructed him. "Then sell."

"But Portland, for heavens sake don't be a fool. This rise is going to be purely temporary. The fall of Rangoon....."

"Will probably add another ten points to steel shares of all kinds," I said.

"But the Japs may be bombing Calcutta at any moment and preparing to attack. In which case there's going to be a panic with any type of share."

"Hold on to them," I repeated. "My instinct says hold on. I've never been so near a fortune. And I must have a fortune."

For suddenly, for apparently no reason, I could see Sheridan sneering at me. If I could smash his firm, buy him out, I would have bought his staff as well. He would take his orders or his dismissal from me, whichever he preferred. I was not so sure that I would not make a good advertising man. I had powerful Government connections and felt sure I could persuade them to cancel most of their Sheridan contracts within a few weeks by offering them the overwhelming attraction of a firm that was all out for national service and not for profit. I knew Sheridan's contracts with Government were only on a monthly basis due to the uncertainty of the national situation. It would be worth the loss of a couple of lakhs to control Advertising Advice and Service.

"As you like," groaned Parker and the operator said "Your three minutes is up please."

I went round my restaurants in high spirits. Somehow this was pouring money into my bank account. It seemed strange that it was stripping so many others bare of all they had. It bore out my belief that there is no God. Hitler is right there, I must say. The fittest shall survive. Men talk of a Nemesis that catches up with those that go their way without a backward or sideward glance or an attempt towards providing a modicum of comfort for others, for those who are more honest, more respectable, more penury-ridden than they. Yet I have heard of few such cases being substantiated. Men die in wealth who have wallowed in sin. "Consider the lilies of the field" says the Bible. Yes, consider them. They toil not, neither do they spin. And they live in a glory all their own. Men like me do not toil. We make others toil for us. And we have our glory. Look at that pitiful fool Traill. He labours and sweats at his idiotic stories and hardly makes enough to keep his body and soul together. The ancient Christians went to their "Maker" via the dripping jaws of the lions that tore them to bits in

bloody arenas. The wise lived on to a hoary old age, renouncing any foolish beliefs they had in God. Balzac's heroes very often died of an excess of love and good red-blooded living—never of an excess of religion. Consider your miserable thin faced rats, the religious maniacs of this world. What do they get out of Life and what out of Death? No one can answer the latter question so why spend lifetimes assuming that the fairy tales written down by the ancients in their possibly numerous idle moments are hard fact?

Consider your bold and noble horse that suddenly rapes a mare. What happens to him? Is he tried, condemned and punished not only in this world but in the next? Yet substitute man and woman and what have you? A farce of legal piffle that is yet necessary for the control of the human race—the race of thinking animals.

We laugh good humouredly at the love-making of sparrows in the trees yet we would shudder to see our own kind making love in public. Or would we? When a dog kills a quail we might slap him hard and call him cruel—if we have not trained him to kill quails. What does "God" do? When a man kills a man, even if the victim is the most despicable creature under the sun, he is hanged. When a nation annoys us we declare war. We fight. We kill each other. We bomb women and children because we can't see what else we are bombing. We award V.C.'s and D.C.M.'s and what not to men and women for brave deeds—deeds which are in reality but legalised murder. What, if "God" does exist, does "He" do?

And yet in the midst of all this carnage we still have the dribbling, weak kneed effrontery to gather in churches and to the tolling of bells and the sickening chant of priests we mumble about the "justness of our cause" and pray to our God to help us to win. It has always struck me as fantastic. Sometimes the thought of it makes me want to vomit.

Yes, live your life say I, and make the most of it, regardless of others. What is right and wrong anyway? Can we gauge it? What standards do we gauge it by? How can it be right to murder millions under the excuse of war, whatever the cause, and wrong to pardon the murderer of an individual no matter what particular brand of criminal that individual is? It takes some straightening out. I for one prefer the easy way. If worse than worms and maggots and oblivion await me on the stroke of death, it can do me no good to worry about it now.

\* \* \*

I soon found that Susan loved her work. She told me with glowing eyes of the new sense of achievement it gave her.

She had heretofore only dabbled in drawing and painting. Now, she said, she had to construct work which did some good in the country and at the same time gave her the satisfaction of earning her livelihood. She was busy on Government propaganda work and it wouldn't be long, she said with pride, before we would begin to see a number of her posters adorning the hoardings, the sidewalks and the walls of buildings.

There seemed little chance, during the next few days, of ever impressing her to such an extent that my plans with regard to her would be successful. In a dark moment, when there really seemed no way out, I even considered matrimony. But the drab horror of such a course appalled me.

Sheridan himself was non-committal with me when we were together in the flat on Malabar Hill. Apparently he was using his own tactics for the capture of Susan's affections. I sensed some definite change in him too, during those few days. He seemed less cynical, less brutal in what he said and thought. But perhaps it was only my imagination.

I tackled him about it as we had a sundowner about the third evening after Susan had begun work for him.

"You're queer these days Sheridan," I muttered. "I've got a feeling you're bloody well falling for that girl." His eyes had a peculiar glint in them.

"I'd never fall for another woman. Oh no. No more love for me. It doesn't exist anyway. It's just a polite name for something purely animal round which we weave fairy tales embodying sighing females and dashing, daring men. Or else it's something as flimsy as a spider's web that comes to you only to be smashed by Fate just as you begin to think it does exist, after all."

But in spite of his words and the look in his eyes I did not believe him. I can trust my senses and my instinct pretty thoroughly as a rule. And when you've lived with a man a long time you spot these changes even more decidedly. And yet it seemed incredible to suppose that Sheridan could ever fall in love again. He had never actually told us what had happened where his previous love or loves were concerned, but it must have been something pretty tough for I had never known him anything else but vicious where women were concerned, with apparently a burning desire to ruin each one he could make a favourable impression on.

Next morning a tearful Susan burst in on us at the breakfast table. Sheridan rose and pulled up a chair for her.

"What on earth's the matter with you?" he asked roughly.

Her face was paler than usual and in her dark eyes was a look I could not explain. She slumped into the chair as if her body had no strength and fumbled in her handbag, extracting a pink telegraph form.

"I just got this," she said, dabbing her eyes with a tiny handkerchief. "I simply had to come here. Somehow one wants to rush to friends at moments like this and I'm afraid I haven't made any friends other than you."

Sheridan read the telegram and then passed it to me, placing a hand on Susan's shoulder. His action opened the floodgates with a vengeance and she turned her face against his coat and sobbed unrestrainedly. The telegram was from Peter Chambers' mother in Delhi.

*"My son told me prior final departure Burma to wire you should anything go wrong. Gave your address. Grieved inform you he was reported to me killed in action twenty-eighth. Margaret Chambers."*

Sheridan and I looked at each other over Susan's bowed head. In his eyes was a look of unmistakable pain. In my heart there was triumphant satisfaction. Traill gone. Chambers gone. It only wanted Sheridan out of the way now and nothing would stop me eventually winning this utterly desirable girl.

"These things do happen, you know," I said, succeeding in making my voice sound deeply sympathetic. "I'm terribly sorry my dear. But you've got to be brave."

"If you like you can take the day off," said Sheridan but she shook her head vehemently.

"No. I'd rather be doing something. I can't believe it. It seems only the other day—oh I wonder why God allows this sort of thing to go on day after day without stopping it! He's supposed to be all powerful and all good."

She had stopped crying now and her eyes flashed in sympathy with the bitter twist to her red mouth. Almost as she stopped speaking the telephone bell rang. It was Parker again on long distance. He sounded relieved.

"I've sold, boss. They went up. You've cleared exactly a million rupees profit."

My hand was shaking as I hung up the receiver.

"Bad news for you too?" asked Sheridan automatically.

I smiled. "No. I've made a million out of Horner's Steels."

Traill gone. Chambers gone. Sheridan under my thumb. I felt confident I could arrange to smash his firm within the

month. The way was almost clear. I wondered whether a cat felt like this when it stalked a bird or played with a mouse. The sensation was gratifying in the extreme.

"You people must have dinner with me tonight to celebrate," I said and next instant realised my mistake. Sheridan glared at me.

"Can't you really understand how Susan's feeling?" he snapped. "Or are you just wood from the waist up?"

But Susan smiled wanly and patted my arm. There was something really good about that girl in that moment, if you know what I mean. Something about her character that got right inside one. She had a power to understand people that suited me down to the ground.

"Gerald's right," she said. "I think it would do me good to try and forget things that way. No useful purpose can be served by sitting and moping."

"You're right, my dear," I said. I had a childish desire to put my tongue out at Sheridan. I restrained myself in time.

## CHAPTER XIII

A LETTER to Traill at Bright Nook in Lonavla remained unanswered. I had merely wanted to find out if he was there or whether he had taken up his residence somewhere else in India. That possibility was hardly likely though, considering his financial state. However, his silence did not worry me. As long he was out of the way everything in the proverbial garden remained proverbially lovely. Apart from my feeling that Susan did really have a soft spot for the crippled brute I reflected that it would be much more comfortable with him at a distance should my plan regarding Susan not go exactly according to schedule or if anything should go wrong and Susan squeal.

Madame Zhukov's suggestion I had pushed to the back of my mind as an absolute last recourse.

It remained now but to set about transferring Advertising Advice and Service from Sheridan's hands to mine or just simply smashing him. I decided on the latter course, which naturally, almost certainly embraced the former, in the long run. By means of skilful staff work and innumerable scouts I gradually located a first class advertising staff. Within a fortnight a new and obviously well backed advertising firm made its name felt in Bombay. The John Dutton Advertising Company certainly looked a powerful concern. Sheridan presently became gloomy and almost morbid.

"These swine are breaking me," he muttered at lunch one day. "The bait they're holding out for Government is too good for me."

Within a week more he had cut his staff down to the barest minimum. Susan still stayed on. I admired his tenacity. He was not parting with so delectable a morsel without a fight!

One morning he looked pale and ill, a shadow of his neat, soldierly, sardonic self. There was something a little pathetic about him.

"Portland," he said, "you're rolling in filthy lucre. Let me have ten thousand on loan." There was entreaty in his tone. The old self-confidence seemed to have left him completely. The effect was thrilling.

"Why, what on earth for?" I enquired blandly. "I thought from your talk the other day that you still had tremendous reserves. You said you were going to show them just what Advertising Advice and Service was made of."

"And show them I would if only I had a few more thousand at this moment."

I shook my head slowly, regretfully.

"You're fighting a lost battle, Sheridan, and you know it. I tell you what I'll do though. I'll buy your firm from you. I've been feeling in need of a sideline lately. You keep your same salary and allowances but operate as my manager."

He looked at me questioningly for a moment or two. His steely eyes seemed to be searching my soul. Suddenly he banged the table with his fist and gritted through his teeth.

"I've got it! The million you made the other day. The fact that Susan wouldn't take the job you offered. Your desire to have her somehow, somewhere under your control. You're this bloody firm, this John Dutton show!"

I waved a contemptuous hand.

"Don't be a fool," I snorted. "Do you think I'd waste so much money in a line that is doomed? Whoever this firm is, it might flourish for a few weeks but even Government propaganda will soon be curtailed. And, from the look of things, the way the Japs are progressing, it might be stopped altogether. Fifth columnists in Burma—and, I have no doubt, Fifth columnists in India. Subhas Bose in Tokyo, reported dead in an air crash. Obviously a bluff. Oh no you don't, I wouldn't waste money—not on a firm that big anyway! Maybe your firm—as an experiment and because I'd like to help Susan and you. What do you say? Ten thousand for the firm."

The sweat was standing out on his forehead and the scar high up on the left side of his scalp shone.

"You liar!" he snarled. "You infamous liar! By God, we swore a pact, you Traill and I, that we would never let each other down where two things were concerned—our individual characters would never be revealed to outsiders and neither of us would take advantage of any of the others in order to deprive him of his living. Each to his own road we said."

"Piffle!" I snorted. I was tired of arguing anyway. I felt I might just as well come out into the open. "Yes, I am John Dutton. So what? What do you intend doing about it?"

He laughed at me suddenly, his expression almost one of relief.

"You childish fat fool! So cunning and full of yourself and yet so doltish, without the sense of a donkey. So set on ruining, in your own filthy, unhurried time, a girl who's worth a million of the sort you should mix with."

"You sound like Traill!"

"I *am* like Traill! He was right in a lot of his sentiments where Susan was concerned. Somehow one realises how much one's guts stink when one gets to know her more. Do you realise, you obese, sweaty lecher, that she'll never put herself in your power? That what I tell her will be sufficient to keep her away from you for all time?"

I went cold of a sudden. He was right. I had blindly and stupidly wasted my time and money in an elaborate "play safe" scheme that was really fantastically foolish when you looked at it. Madame Zhukov's advice had been soundest after all. But now it was quite definite that Susan would never allow herself to stay at the Blue Heaven for a fortnight—or even for a day. I thought rapidly. There was only one thing for it. Only one thing in my favour. Time.

"There's no need to blacken me, Sheridan," I said slowly. "Will you give me your word you'll keep quiet with Susan about your suspicions where this was concerned and also about anything else connected with me if I give you back your firm—if I give you something extra thrown in—ten thousand cash—and if John Dutton Advertising Company suddenly closes its doors?"

The reply was swift.

"Yes, I'll give you my word. Not only that, I'll keep it."

I breathed a sigh of relief. There was still a chance that I might succeed. A lean chance, true, but it was a chance. My voice cracked slightly.

"Then that's done. From now on Government will be giving you back your contracts."

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After that I felt that it would be just as well to keep out of Susan's way for a while in case I gave anything away by a sense of tension in her company. I felt I could rely on Sheridan to keep his word. Advertising Advice and Service suddenly recovered and Sheridan was once more his sinister

self where I was concerned—only slightly more so. I realised he held a powerfully heavy hammer over my head in connection with any impression I might wish to make on Susan and I knew he would not hesitate to bring it crashing down should he think it necessary. An eye for an eye is any man's creed at heart. I found myself praying that I would not desire Susan so much, so completely to the exclusion of all other women. It seemed fantastic that Sheridan should be able to gloat so effectively merely because I wanted Susan. If millions had been at stake, or my life, it might have been more understandable. But just my desire for a scrap of humanity. It is strange indeed with what complexes we humans are born. It was a far cry from that distant hayrick in Hornleigh to modern, ultra smart Bombay with its concrete edifices and electric trains. But maybe you do not find it hard to understand. Maybe there is no need for me to try and explain something I cannot. Men have risked millions for a woman. They have risked their happiness. Their lives. But I wax a trifle melodramatic.

The days went by and I found myself contemplating Madame Zhukov's suggestion more and more seriously. But, I reflected, it would be impossible to carry it out in the face of Sheridan. The fool was in love with her. He would never allow her to stay in the Blue Heaven. My object would be so apparent. The indecision began to make my temper short. Madame Zhukov looked at me in dismay many a time when she was obliged to bear the brunt of my tongue.

And then came the final fantastic shock. Sheridan informed me at breakfast one Sunday morning that Susan had agreed to marry him if Chambers did not turn up within six months. She felt that there *might* have been a mistake in the official announcement. Men pronounced dead had been known to turn up weeks, months later—cut off and imprisoned by the enemy.

I began to even contemplate killing Sheridan. I have never killed a human being. But I felt I would destroy Sheridan before the end of that six months. In fact, I thought, the sooner the better. Madame Zhukov's plan would have to go by the board anyway.

Sheridan's transformation amazed me most. But when the solution of it suddenly struck me, I could not help but chuckle at my own stupidity in even grudgingly admiring his new respectability. His object was the same as mine! Susan at any price—even the drab horror of marriage.

The absorbing problem of how to get rid of Sheridan in safety occupied my thoughts pretty fully for some days.

And then one day it came to me in all its simplicity. Why not kill three birds with one stone? Engineer things so that Traill, with his weird, unnerving capacity for sudden flaming passion, would murder Sheridan, get himself hanged, and thus throw Susan into my arms. With them in the way—the memory of one and the flesh and blood of the other—I stood no chance. I am fat and ugly. My body perspires continually. It must be horror for any woman to imagine me making love to her, especially when an obstacle like Sheridan or Traill was in the way. Though God knows what Susan had ever seen in Traill.

Yes, three birds with one stone. And what better place than Lonavla in the Western Ghats—with its grassy hills and deep, clear cut chasms, down which a man, or perhaps even two men, might fall in mortal combat! What better setting for it all than Blue Dell where it overlooked the beauty of those self-same Western Ghats! My perspicacity surprised me.

I felt sure Traill was in Lonavla. Otherwise, I thought, my letter would have been returned to me through the Dead Letter Office long since. I could imagine him brooding like a vulture on a rock overlooking a valley or one of Tata's magnificent lakes. I could picture his gloomy, twisted face and hunched up shoulders, his maimed right leg dragging along after him when he walked. Poor Traill. He did not know what was coming to him.

Having made up my mind it remained but to start organising things as soon as possible but in such a way that no one, least of all Sheridan, would suspect anything. It was difficult to say whether a snag existed in Sheridan's knowledge that Traill possessed a house in Lonavla. He might not want to go to the delightful place knowing that Susan had felt kindly disposed towards Traill. On the other hand the prospect might appeal to him. He might wish to settle, once for all, any doubt that existed in his mind as to whether Susan actually loved this twisted monstrosity or not. One thing was quite certain though, Traill must not know of our arrival in the town until I was prepared to let him know—under an assumed name. Otherwise the full effect of the plan formulating in my brain would be lost. Traill was queer, but I did not know if he was queer enough to murder Sheridan for loving Susan—it was quite likely that in his twisted way he might admire and respect him for it.

A moment of horror assailed me when the thought struck me that Traill himself might have discarded all feelings for Susan. That he might not be so violently disposed as I so cheerfully presumed him to be. But I had seen that queer

murderous light in his eyes so often, especially when he had been championing Susan in the face of Sheridan and me.

That night I took Sheridan and Susan to the Taj for a Cabaret Dinner Dance. I felt overflowing with good will and human kindness towards everyone, even a certain fat lady in a silver sequin dress who always seemed to have the appalling temerity to sit close to us, even towards Sheridan himself for the moment.

As we reached the entree stage of the meal I shuddered for, coming towards us with determination in her eye as she picked her way across the floor, was Madame Zhukov. I wanted to see no person less than her at this moment, with Sheridan and Susan next to me. Her cheerful, startlingly unconventional tongue might wag too freely.

Her silver bangles rattled irritably as she sat down and made herself comfortable, hardly glancing at Sheridan or me. Her deep set little eyes were intent on Susan's face.

"My dear," she cooed, "you are lovelier than I ever was at your age! You are beautiful. Yes, the birds and the flowers must feel—how you say—jealous of you when you walk amongst them!"

"That's very sweet of you," said Susan, a little bemused. I don't think she remembered Madame Zhukov from the lunch she had had at the Blue Heaven. I hastened to introduce the stocky little woman.

"This is Madame Zhukov, Susan. You may not have noticed her at the Blue Heaven that day you had lunch with me. She's the Manageress there. It's her night off if I remember rightly!"

Susan's gaze took in the woman's garishness and a smile appeared around her red lips.

"You're from abroad?" she asked. Any refuge or evacuee seemed to find a ready soft spot in her make up. Madame Zhukov's reply was eager, voluble.

"Yes indeed. From Poland my dear. It was terrible when that maniac's army did capture our country. Women and children were crushed under tanks deliberately. Girls were raped in villages and horribly mutilated afterwards. I have not seen before such horror, such brutality. So much so I have often thought is there a God or is there not?"

All the while she was speaking her little eyes roamed over Susan's face and figure appraisingly, admiringly. I noticed she had not mentioned that she was also Jewish and Roumanian. At last she breathed again, "You are lovely. Please to excuse me for saying it again. But you are!"

Susan laughed self-consciously.

" You're really too flattering," she murmured.

Madame Zhukov's eyes moved to mine with a hidden question in them. This was the first time she had really viewed Susan from close and at leisure. And I knew she must be condemning me for a fool for not accepting her almost motherly desire to help me by trapping this girl into the most damning position. Her ideas of love at the best of times have been crude and unrefined, with nature in the raw uppermost. Perhaps she was brought up like that, in some poor village where the lower elements of human nature are to the fore as a matter of course. The very ingenuousness with which she regarded the possibility of my seducing Susan amazed me. It would not have surprised me if she had suddenly said aloud to Susan here in the Taj Ballroom, " Why do you not sleep with Gerald tonight, my dear ? "

When she had gone, rolling back to her table like a sailor, Susan said, " What a delightful old thing ! "

" Yes," murmured Sheridan with a touch of his old sardonic bitterness. " Delightful indeed. But did you notice her eyes ? "

## CHAPTER XIV

THERE is something about Bombay that is very fascinating, in spite of its notoriously muggy heat. From the scraggy sea-side rocks and the military barracks and offices of Colaba to the crowded, bustling suburbs, the city always seems to be doing something. There is never that quiet peacefulness that is so noticeable in towns like Delhi and even in certain parts of Calcutta. When the local trains disgorge their teeming complement of city workers at Churchgate Station every morning, it is hard to realise that there is actually a job for each individual. You can see them crowding the road from one end of the Oval near the Rajabai Clock Tower and when one realises that almost as great a quantity gets off the locals at the innumerable intermediate suburban stations it is apt to be a little staggering. In spite of one's self one is somewhat overwhelmed by the rather hackneyed but nonetheless accurate knowledge that one is identifiable with each of these tiny mechanical cogs in the wheels of the universe. Individual importance is but a figment of man's imagination and egotism after all.

It seemed more than strange to me that Sunday afternoon as I drove my sleek blue Buick down Hornby Road on my way back to the flat, that amongst all these teeming hundreds of thousand of people I should be constantly occupied with thoughts of but one of them—Susan Mannering.

So preoccupied was I that I did not notice the slight figure of an Indian girl dash across the road in front of my car until it was too late. I jammed the brakes on as hard as I could—there was a scream and a bump as the car struck. Shouts came from the pavements. When I got out I saw that the girl was unconscious and bleeding from the nose. She appeared to be a Tamil and looked half starved. I rushed her into the car and drove rapidly back past Victoria Terminus Station to the European General Hospital.

A cool nerveless doctor soon informed me that the girl had been lucky. She would live. He asked for my name and address. I stated I would pay all damages. I must say I

felt pretty shaken. I 'phoned the police and gave them particulars of the accident and then left for home. Just before I left, the Tamil girl, cleaner than when she had entered the place, came round and murmured her name in reply to the doctor's questioning. She was a Tamil Christian, apparently, and her name was Yolanda. I wondered at the elaborate and unusual name. Rosy or Judy or Bessy, yes. Your Indian Christians and their Tamil sisters seem to think of few other. But Yolanda! Somehow, for a brief moment, the pathetic sight of her lying there, her black skin a peculiarly livid and greenish hue, one eye closed by a terrible bruise, touched me. It seemed, for that moment, that I was looking at myself from a distance and was finding myself strangely lacking in human qualities. But the feeling passed.

That night I happened to mention the accident at Susan's place, a new flat on one of the Reclamation Roads into which she had moved some time ago and where Sheridan and I were having dinner.

"The poor kid has the most fantastic name, according to her," I finished. "It was Yolanda. I felt mighty....."

"Yolanda?" Susan's voice was keenly questioning. "I'm sure there can only be one Tamil girl with that name! Was she small and rather good looking, with a scar over her right eye?"

"I didn't notice that, I'm afraid," I replied. We had just finished dinner and she insisted on either of us driving her immediately to the hospital. Her eyes were bright.

"I've a strong feeling she's my poor little Tamil ayah from Malaya," she said. "She was dragged away by a party of Japanese, I heard, soon after they had entered our estate."

When we reached the hospital we were told it was strictly against regulations to allow visitors at that time of night. But on Susan's entreaties and when she had heard her story, the matron on duty allowed us a visit of five minutes—to be conducted as quietly as possible in whispers.

The victim of my mental preoccupation was awake, one bright eye staring at the ceiling, the other still closed. One look was enough for Susan. She moved forward swiftly and the girl reached up an emaciated arm as soon as she saw her.

"Mistress Susan," she smiled a trifle wanly. "My, but it's very good to see you madam! How long you been here?"

The peculiar sing song accent of the south was in her voice. I saw that Susan's eyes were wet.

"Since—since soon after we got away that day," answered Susan. "Yolanda, I never thought I'd see you again. Thank

goodness I have—even if it has been made possible by an accident! You're going to start working for me again as soon as you're well. How did you get away, my dear girl? We couldn't find you—couldn't wait."

The girl shut her good eye for a moment and smiled a trifle more broadly.

"They think they know all the *sakais* paths and *ladangs*!" she said. "But they sadly mistaken. Joseph from the Wilson's house was with me. He was with his master trying to get away when they saw Mr. Peter's plane. He too unlucky to get into the cockpit. His master get away. But Joseph captured by those terrible men. Four of them left us to go quickly back to the house. And Joseph suddenly stabs the three who remain. He kills them like lightning in the dark and we get away. But poor Joseph he is later killed by a piece of bomb near one of the creeks west of Johore. Then a friendly old man brings me in his sampan to Sumatra where we were many days crossing the island. Then we soon put up on a boat. Very exciting on that boat madame. But you? You quite all right?"

She turned that single gleaming orb anxiously on Susan who for some unknown reason dropped her gaze for a moment and looked uncomfortable. Somehow the moment was tense and electric. I don't know why it should have been but these two women, one white, one black, appeared to definitely be the poles between which that peculiar current passed.

"Yes, all right, Yolanda—quite all right. I got away with Mr. Peter. But how do you feel?"

"Much better. The doctor he says I will be out of hospital in a week. I am very grateful to the master here for running into me. For I am happy now once more with you."

The matron hustled in at that moment and hustled us out of the quiet ward.

"Sorry, she's got to sleep now," she told us. "And incidentally, so have all the rest of the poor creatures to sleep!"

As we drove home through the quiet, blacked out roads, I could not help but remember those few queer seconds of surcharged atmosphere that had sprung into being in the ward.

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Within the week the dusky Yolanda was out of hospital and had become an integral part of Susan's flat. I must confess it intrigued me to see the businesslike manner in which the girl went about her duties and the unbending control she immediately exercised over the cook and the bearer and

every tradesman that came to the door during any of our visits. She was a live wire and no mistake. According to Susan she had been born on the estate that Paul Mannering had managed and had lost her parents from snake bite at the age of eleven, which was when Susan had come to the estate as the wife of the "master." The girl had all the dash and courage and capability of a veteran and her Puckish face had a charm of its own. When her body began to fill out after a few days of real food I guessed that she was already causing a few male servants' hearts to flutter in the building.

Susan was particularly fond of the child and was, I thought, somewhat too lavish in her treatment. But when I mentioned this jokingly to her, she merely smiled and said quietly, "You were never a refugee from Malaya, were you Gerald? Believe me, good friend, you had to be there to understand the terrible feeling it all gave one when we suddenly realised we were right in the centre of red, bloody war! You've no idea of some of the horrible things that happened. Some of the ghastly deaths. Some day I suppose the full story of the loss of Malaya will be told. And there will be many ugly passages in it."

Her eyes at that moment were looking very far back into the black weeks she had passed through.

During the next few days I thought she had become strangely preoccupied and worried. I wondered if all was not going well between her and Sheridan. A wild hope sprang up within me at the thought. Perhaps there would be no need for the plan I had not yet quite fully formulated. The one that had for a background the scenic beauty of the Western Ghats.

One night at the Blue Heaven Madame Zhukov approached me with a serious expression on her doughy looking features.

"Your Susan was here this afternoon for lunch," she said heavily. "How did she say—she wanted to try out a new lunch place. I thought she is not so happy as that night I say how d'you do to her at the Taj Mahal Hotel. Then when the waitress she bring her food and uncover the dish, the so lovely Susan she get sick in the ladies' room. Very sick. It is not so good my friend."

"Good heavens! What....."

She raised a fat arm, her bangles rattling.

"No, no, there is no need to alarm yourself. Not over her health. It is but an ordinary thing. My old eyes are experienced. She is going to have a baby."

"What?"

"Tcha! Don't sound so startled." But in spite of the lightness of her tone her expression was still grim. "I fear she has made a fool of herself with your friend Sheridan."

"Did you speak to her about this?"

"No. Why should I? It is no business of mine. If she wants to have a baby, why, what can I do?"

When I got home Sheridan was not there. I turned the wireless on and listened almost without hearing to the ranting voice of the German radio announcer. There was something inside me which I could not quite place. I did not know if it was a feeling of profound disgust at what I had heard from Madame Zhukov or whether it was a sense of relief in the knowledge that she, whom we thought so virtuous, was not so unassailable after all. I switched onto Delhi and heard the plaintive station call.

"It is officially stated that the Japanese are exerting heavy pressure on the Salween front," intoned the announcer's voice but I heard it from a distance.

It was unbelievable to think of Susan with a child somehow. What devilishly smooth charm had Sheridan exerted on her? And how did this affect my plan? Obviously the sooner I got rid of him the better. But Susan? Was there so much desirability in a flower that is crushed? In a fruit that is bruised?

When Sheridan returned I hardly spoke to him.

"Just back from the pictures," he announced. "One of those crazy Laurel and Hardy things. You should have heard Susan laughing. Did me good, I can tell you!"

I grunted, "That so?" and went to bed.

I could not sleep for hours. Child or no child, Sheridan must die and Susan must be mine. The very melodramatic way the thought entered my head made me suddenly chuckle to myself in the dark. I was worried no longer. The mantle of depression had lifted. All was well with the world.

Next morning I went along to Sheridan's office. I gave Susan one of my most avuncular smiles as I passed her in the studio and she waved a paint brush cheerily at me. Sheridan looked at me keenly across his glass table top. There was a certain wariness in his glance. He has never quite trusted me, I think, since the John Dutton business.

"Look here," I sailed into my subject gaily, "I'm tired of Bombay, Sheridan, and I propose a bloody good holiday for Easter. What about you and Susan accompanying me and staying a week at Blue Dell? I'm sure the holiday will do her good too. Come on, what do you say?"

"Why, that's decent of you, Portland," he said. The suspicious look had left his face and his eyes. "To tell you the truth I feel pretty stale myself. Could do with a break. This constant grind at copy and schedules and layouts and propaganda has been getting me down. I'm sure Susan will agree."

As he picked up his house 'phone and got on to the studio I found myself marvelling that a man could have changed so much in so short a time—or at least *appeared* to have changed.

"Susan," he said into the mouthpiece, "Gerald wants us to spend a week at his place in Lonavla. It's in the Ghats, you know. You'd love it. Blue Dell, it's called. A grand place. Don't say no. We can make it for Easter. Carthew will take over."

Apparently she agreed at once for he smiled, said, "Fine, then, that's settled. We'll probably be starting tomorrow early—about six, won't we?" he turned to me for confirmation. I nodded. "Yes, tomorrow early, Susan. Just take enough stuff for a week. Petrol coupons? Oh Gerald knows someone who knows someone who knows someone. You know the old efficient story."

When I left him I found myself reflecting on the state of Susan's mind. How must she be feeling, knowing that she was pregnant? I couldn't understand her attitude at all. She seemed perfectly normal and at ease with Sheridan. True there was that worried look in her eyes at times. The solution, I thought, flashed into my mind. Her husband of course! Why should he not be the father of her child? She was a widow. He had only just been killed. But the time element, I realised as swiftly, did not bear out the supposition. This business was much more recent—otherwise it would have been fairly obvious. Or would it? I didn't quite know.

Surely she would do something about it all? If it was her husband's child, for instance, there would be no shame in her acknowledging it. But maybe she had her plans cut and dried. Perhaps when Sheridan and Traill were out of the way she would confide in me. Then I would indeed be Uncle Gerald to her. Kind, benevolent, considerate. I would arrange everything for her so that not a soul in Bombay would know a thing if she so desired it. And then later would surely come my reward, either gained voluntarily from her or forcibly on my part, for I knew I would throw caution to the winds sooner or later. I could not stand this "hope deferred" business much longer. Meantime the burning question of the day related to the success of my plan.

Would Traill jump to the bait? Would he react according to all the laws of psychology?

I had lunch at the Blue Heaven and treated Madame Zhukov to several pink gins. She questioned me again in her peculiarly persistent manner about Susan's state.

"You're wrong, you old fool!" I snorted. "You must be crazy! Or it must have been a vile lunch you gave her that day. Sack the chef if necessary."

She wagged a stumpy finger at me, the bangles rattling maddeningly at her wrist. One day I shall feel terribly inclined to cut her hand off with one fell sweep of a carving or table knife, I'm sure. It would give me the greatest pleasure to see her bangles fall from her wrist and roll about the floor.

## CHAPTER XV

WHEN Sheridan and I called at Susan's flat that evening I was amazed to see a familiar large figure seated opposite Susan. It was Mrs. York. Susan introduced her to Sheridan.

"Mrs. York's here for a holiday," she explained to both of us. "I gave her my address recently and told her to come along any time. *I owe her so much!*"

"It's just as well she didn't come tomorrow," I said a trifle drily. How was this going to affect my plan? It meant for one thing that we had to invite her along to Lonavla with us. But it did not matter. A moment's thought convinced me that the plan could go ahead with or without Mrs. York present. It was Traill's reactions that counted.

"That's what is worrying me a bit Gerald," Susan's voice was diffident. "Would you mind Mrs. York.....?"

"Coming along? Nonsense!" I smiled a welcome into the words which I really did not feel. I had not forgotten the opinion I had overheard this lump of a woman expressing to her husband before I left Fyzabad. "Mrs. York is welcome. And I'm sure we'll be able to give her a great time. One thing is certain, Mrs. York,—you'll like Lonavla better than Fyzabad. You've no idea what an attractive little place it is. But maybe you've been there?"

She shook her head. I noticed she did not seem so self assertive and self possessed as she had been in Fyzabad. A worried frown was between her eyes even as she replied.

"No, I havn't. I'm really grateful for your hospitality, Mr. Portland."

"I'm already indebted to you for my stay in Fyzabad," I returned.

"You'll have to be ready by six in the morning, Vera," laughed Susan and I thought that laugh was a little strained. But I may have been mistaken. "Can you manage that, dear?"

Mrs. York puffed contemptuously at the idea of her not being able to manage anything. Yolanda shooed the butler into the room with cold drinks, criticism of the man positively oozing from her trim young body.

"I love your little ayah," said Mrs. York. "Where did you get her Susan?"

"Oh, I havn't had time to tell you yet, have I? She was with me in Malaya, poor child. Was cut off from me. But she managed to get away and out here. The strangest coincidence made Mr. Portland accidentally knock her down in his car the other day."

Sheridan appeared to be weighing Mrs. York in the balance and apparently her fresh, clean hugeness and forthright manner favourably impressed him. There was practically nothing of the bitter Sheridan of old left in him. He listened to the women monopolising the talk with a tolerant and friendly grin on his face.

"What's all the news from Fyzabad?" asked Susan of her stout friend. "The Club still going strong?"

"Yes. I'm really nervous about leaving Malcolm there alone with all the desirable females! I heard they had got another five nurses at the hospital!"

"Desirable females—like the one that killed her husband?" Susan laughed. Mrs. York waved a fat deprecating hand.

"Oh, that one. She fell down the other day, the poor thing, and broke her collar bone. It was while she was chasing some vendor off her verandah. I felt terribly sorry for her. I always feel sorry in a way for women who have had to kill their husbands."

Sheridan burst out laughing and entered the conversation.

"Do you now, really, Mrs. York?"

She nodded vehemently.

"Of course. Because you can take it from me—the husband usually deserves it—although in this case he didn't, I must say!"

"But doesn't the knife cut both ways?" I inserted. The conversation was amusing if not intelligent or interesting. Besides, it more or less fitted in with my desire to get rid of Traill and Sheridan—with my mood, I mean. I thought suddenly in passing that if Traill knew Sheridan had loved Susan physically that thought alone would be sufficient or would probably be sufficient to urge him to destroy the man. Assuming, of course, that Sheridan and not Susan's husband was responsible for the present state of affairs. But Traill

was queer. He might be tempted to destroy Susan as well. Some of these hypersensitive cripples were like that. However, my plan was one of the simplest. And Traill would want to destroy only one person, I felt sure of that. Sheridan, Susan and I would be the witnesses to his crime—and now Mrs. York. Our evidence might get him off with a reduced sentence, but I doubted it. I hoped we would not have to give evidence of the favourable kind. But Mrs. York was addressing me.

"What did you say?" I queried. "I'm afraid I was dreaming for a moment."

"I asked if you had had your place in Lonavla long."

"For about four years. Built it myself. It's called Blue Dell."

"What a delightful name!"

It was strange to hear her talking without an occasional swear word thrown in and somehow the fact emphasised her mental preoccupation with something that was worrying her. I thought I had the reason. It was fairly obvious. Susan had confided in her about the child she was going to have. But how strange that she should have confided in anyone, even the greatest of friends, when the culprit was constantly in their company. Surely any normal woman would feel ashamed, awkward?

Then, after the dinner that Susan was always able to raise for us somehow whenever we dropped in, the solution to it all came out and my desire for Susan was swept clean of any faint disgust that lingered at the thought of her affair with Sheridan. By now I was convinced that it was Sheridan and not her husband.

Susan and Mrs. York had left us to go inside and "powder their noses" as Mrs. York put it. The passage leading to the kitchen passed Susan's bedroom. And Fate decreed that I should suddenly get it into my head to tell Susan's cook not to forget to be prepared to cook his special brand of Indian curry while in Lonavla. The cook, Sheridan and I had happened to be weak at curries.

I was wearing the usual crepe rubber soles that I have a weakness for and as I passed Susan's door I got a glimpse in the mirror that faced the door of Mrs. York standing with her arms round Susan and obviously comforting her. Susan seemed to have just stopped crying, from the brief glimpse I had. I paused instinctively, even though I knew, or thought I knew, the exact reason for Mrs. York's visit, the worried looks both she and Susan bore and this consoling here in the bedroom. Mrs. York's question was clear. Apparently we

had disturbed them when we arrived and had prevented them from talking.

"But are you *sure*, dear?" asked Mrs. York.

"Yes. I hoped and prayed I was wrong. But there's no hope."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"No."

"Then you're a fool. They can do anything these days."

"Somehow—somehow I daren't, Vera."

"But you must. It would be too terrible, too gruesome, for you to have this child. You would want to murder it every time you looked at it."

I passed on swiftly. Madame Zhukov *was* right. Something inside me seemed to crack. I talked to the cook in a daze, hardly knowing what I said. I found myself suddenly trying to visualise the horror and agony a woman must feel at childbirth, the countless occasions on which it must have occurred in the widespread theatres of this insane war while bombs fell and screamed. I felt a little sick and when I joined Sheridan in the drawing room he said. "What the devil's the matter with you? You're looking ghastly!"

"Oh, just the heat of the kitchen," I replied a trifle testily. "I went in to tell Susan's cook about turning out plenty of curries in Lonavla."

I sat down under the fan and quaffed off my whisky and soda, grunting, "Ah, that's better."

"I should say it was! You looked like old man Death walking out of a refrigerator."

I wondered if I should tell Sheridan what I had heard. But I could not make up my mind. Confusedly mixing with the sudden feeling of horror I had experienced on Susan's behalf was still my undeniable, unquenchable desire for her. May be that desire had suddenly become tempered with something more reverent than mere physical need—if you can imagine an unattractive, perhaps physically repellent human being like me feeling anything but vilely about any woman. May be it was merely the reaction of the moment. Whatever it was it was hard to say whether it would serve my purpose to tell Sheridan anything. Perhaps if I let him find things out for himself he would feel disgusted to such an extent that he would want to have nothing more to do with her. Whatever the story of his previous life, he had obviously had some good reason for the cheap, cynical view he had taken of women up to now. But if the reaction were in the opposite direction? If he suddenly sprang, as so many men

do, to the opposite extreme and felt protectively tender about her and the whole affair—what then? I would be in a worse position than ever.

But the sick feeling persisted in spite of myself. Could I continue with this plan of mine? Could I now destroy these two, Traill and Sheridan, without turning a hair—as I had felt certain I could have done before? Could I pursue Susan, in however genteelly a rampant manner? The answer to my thoughts slipped temporarily into the future for Susan and Mrs. York reappeared, both apparently perfectly happy and self-possessed. I have often thought how wonderful it is, the manner in which a woman can bluff the world about whatever sorrow befalls her. She will be suffering agony but she will tell you it is nothing. And yet she will scream at a mouse. And, too, when it suits her, she can bluff the world, and particularly men, about her feelings in regard to them. As a wife a woman can deceive a husband for years and keep a lover. As a lover she can give her life for her man's safety and never let him suspect for a moment what she has done. As a woman who loves her husband she will keep the very world at bay on his behalf, whilst at the same time she might nag him and make him miserable.

We discussed the trip we were going to make on the morrow, going into details of luggage, clothes and bedding.

When Sheridan and I got home it was still early. We gave the servants instructions about packing and also about calling us in the morning at four o'clock. After that we sat down and had a last drink before turning in. I suddenly made up my mind to sound him.

"Sheridan—tell me—what would you do if you were a man in love with a girl whom, you suddenly found, to your horror, was going to have a baby?"

He looked at me surprisingly for a moment. Then he laughed almost unrestrainedly for quite some seconds.

"Good lord, you do think up some queer things, Portland!" he said when he could speak. "I honestly think you're becoming more human every day. Why, what's the matter? One of your waitresses gone and made a fool of herself and now asking Nunký Gerald for advice?"

"Don't be a fool!" I snorted. "Nunký! Honestly, Sheridan, you irritate me sometimes. I've asked you a straightforward question. Maybe one of my girls is in trouble. That doesn't really concern you."

He looked at me quizzically now and I thought there was a really friendly expression in the depths of his eyes.

"Well, it's hard to say," he said. "Let me think back for a moment. If I were to have become aware of the fact, let's see, five years ago, I would have stamped and roared and lashed the girl with my tongue and a horsewhip—if I had had one handy. Because at that time anything like that was anathema to me—for certain very good reasons. Very good reasons at the time. I don't say they are now. But were I in the same position today, I think I would try and find out first who was responsible for the girl's condition and whether he had bluffed or forced her into the thing or whether he had been encouraged by her and she was definitely playing a double game with me. Having settled everything to my satisfaction I would act."

He paused to light a cigarette and I leaned forward slightly.

"Yes?" I asked. "How would you act?"

"If the girl was not really to blame I think I would kill the man. If the man was not wholly to blame I think I'd kill them both. And if the man was solely to blame I think I'd torture him.....slowly, before inflicting a much deserved death on him! Sounds melodramatic eh? Probably is too. Ha! Ha!"

"You would not take into consideration the fact that a man's brain may be diseased, unable to help itself, beyond his control?"

"No." His face was a little grim of a sudden. "No. Because I would reason that, if a man was like that, he would be a menace to society, no matter how sorry one felt for him. Besides, he would be happier dead."

"And if the *girl* couldn't help *herself*? If, for example, she had such a mind? A poor pathetic mind that made her go astray."

His lips were definitely grim now. The pulse near the scar high up on his scalp throbbed.

"Are you really wanting information, Portland," he asked coldly, "or are you playing the fool?"

His life story was plain to read in those few seconds. He had glanced back into the past. And had found it wanting.

"No, I really need information."

"Well, I would kill her too. For her own sake."

"But surely love would persuade you differently? Surely if you loved her and knew for a fact.....well.....that she could not help herself....."

"When does a man know for a fact that a woman can't help herself?" he gritted. I noticed that his knuckles were white through the skin of his clenched hands.

"And if a man, a total stranger, say a German soldier for instance, in his moment of triumph at war, were to be the man responsible, without the consent of this imaginary girl of ours, for her misery—what then?"

His face suddenly relaxed into a smile in which there was not the slightest trace of bitterness or impatience or anger.

"Why, you fool, I'd tear the guts out of the bastard and I think I'd marry the girl so as to help her keep her chin up."

I went to bed still trying to puzzle out my own feelings and what I had gained from my rather vague questioning.

## CHAPTER XVI

THAT night I had a vivid dream.

It seemed that enemy bombers were suddenly sailing over Bombay. I could make them out distinctly, their Japanese markings, and yet at the same time they seemed miles away. I could see the sticks of bombs come hurtling down gracefully, as if projected on a screen in slow motion, till they were just overhead. One was coming straight for me, growing larger and larger and then, just as it seemed that it could not miss me, it changed into the face of Traill, twisted and vindictive and ghastly. He was grinning devilishly at me and his lips drew back tauntly from his teeth. His voice was a resonant boom, funereal and distant and yet distinct. I was rooted to the ground with a sense of horror I could not explain—the sort of horror one does feel in dreams when one wants to run—and cannot.

"You are all evil, Portland," said his voice. "And therefore you must die. You are planning the destruction of an innocent girl—but you will die. You may succeed but a terrible death awaits you. A death you cannot dream of now, it will come so suddenly. You will know what it is to die slowly. You will be fully conscious of your agony—physical and mental. You are all evil, Portland."

"But I am not!" I cried back at him desperately. "I am not. Traill, for God's sake don't look at me like that! No man is all evil, Traill. We are born to certain failings. We cannot help them. Don't condemn me, Traill, for God's sake!"

I could see myself as from another body, grovelling in the mud at his feet, saliva drooling from my mouth and mixing with the earth, my fingers reaching out, crooked and desperate, for his twisted feet which had materialised from nowhere. I kissed those feet and looked up at him entreatingly, but there was no sign of yielding in his face, no sign of salvation. He kicked me away from him and I fell whining into the dust.

"I will repent," I groaned. "I will not seek her destruction."

"You cannot repent. And nothing will prevent you seeking her destruction. And nothing will prevent you dying a death of slow, exquisite agony. There is no God or beauty, says your soul. There is no quality called sympathy. There is no quality called love. There is only one person worth thinking about in life and that, you say, is Gerald Portland. Your life is governed by self. Take all, feed well, prosper at the expense of others, especially the girls who work for you. But die as you are destined to die."

Suddenly, from nowhere, he produced some enormous circular weapon. I could not make out what it was. It was a huge blur in the centre of which glared his livid, twisted face, bloodless and of the stuff that dreams are made of. Next second he seemed to hold the weapon in one hand and something shining and flimsy in the other. Something blue, something that made me want to weep as I looked at it. I did not know what it was. I did not know anything after that except that the weapon in Traill's hand was approaching my chest, thrust there with dreamlike slowness. I could not move an inch. Nearer it came and nearer. I screamed and struggled desperately to get away. But his evil face grinned the more broadly.

"Now—Portland now!" he cried and I fell gurgling to the ground, his weapon through my chest. As I felt the life ebbing from me his face exploded with a loud crash and I awoke.

A storm was raging outside and the crash I had heard must have been thunder. For as I lay there, sweating despite the fan, exhausted from the nightmare strain, it was repeated. Somehow I remembered on the instant how Traill had always hated storms. They used to make him moody, depressed and sometimes even hysterically nervous.

Utter relief filled me as I turned over and composed myself again for sleep. Traill! With his twisted leg and his awful face! I snorted suddenly to myself, contemptuous about my fear in the dream. I had been thinking about him too much lately, thinking too much of him attacking Sheridan with murder in his eyes, and accomplishing my purpose. It must have been reacting on my subconscious mind.

Tomorrow we would go and seek Traill and see how effectively he could act in life! Would he be as dramatic and terrifying as he had been in a dream? And how would

he look on the end of a rope—when a judge and jury had pronounced him guilty of murder?

\* \* \*

Bombay at four o'clock that morning reminded me of a giant graveyard. Gray and ghostly, the huge gravestones of buildings rose all about the place, different shapes, different sizes, filled with vaults in which people slept. Everything for once was quiet. There were no owls, no night birds. Just the distant sigh of the sea that might be the wind soughing through the gaunt branches of dead and dying trees in a burial ground.

Sheridan and I packed the Buick, with the help of our two sleepy eyed servants. Around my neck I slung my movie camera. Mustn't forget that! It was the most important piece of luggage where the whole trip was concerned. Everything ready, we set out to pick up Susan and Mrs. York.

The dull gleam of their blacked out lights could be seen from the road below. I realised that we were somewhat early. It was only 4-30. We sat in the car for a quarter of an hour and then went up to call them. They were all excitement and were ready.

"We've arranged for the servants to leave by train," said Susan, "so Yolanda and your cook had better join them. They should get there before we do and can get on with the lunch."

Which of you who have motored through Bombay's deserted streets and along her roads in the early morning can ever forget the experience? I am no literary man and I know my soul is mainly limited to the enjoyment and appreciation of materialistic things, sensual things. But I always get a thrill out of this experience. Perhaps it is just the feeling of power that enters into me, sweeping along in my sleek, voluptuous car, monarch of the road, glanced at by the few scattered shopkeepers opening their shutters with sleep in their eyes and sepulchral coughs on their chests. The smell of the tarmacadam seeps up from the road, mingled with the queer persistent scent of the previous day's quota of cow and horse dung removed during the night by municipal sweepers.

As you sweep out by Sion the breeze blows fresh across the creeks and at Kurla, in contrast, you clamp your hand-kerchief to your nose as the village population shamelessly performs its morning toilet at the side of a long section of the road.

And then the fragrant, fascinating country side.....

Susan and Mrs. York were spellbound with the trip. They had not seen this part of the world before. And somehow for me too there seemed a sharper, keener appreciation of the country itself and the very sense of passing through it. Perhaps it was the subconscious reaction to the dream I had had about Traill. Perhaps it was merely my egotistic self coming to the surface. I can't say.

Susan and Mrs. York sat in the back of the car and indulged in sundry exclamations of delight while Sheridan and I, in front, pointed out various details of the scenery and countryside to them.

"My word, but I'll have a lot to tell Malcolm when I get back!" said Mrs. York more than once, expressing her simple appreciation of everything. "I'm really grateful to you, Susan dear, for asking me to Bombay for a holiday in the first place and to you, Mr. Portland, for this lovely trip."

I smiled into the fresh morning air. Why had Susan really asked her? Not for a holiday but to get her advice and to arrange matters, perhaps, for a return holiday to Fyzabad—later, when things became too noticeable where the baby was concerned. The qualms of horror and sympathy I had felt for Susan had disappeared. I still desired her and I did not feel any disgust about her condition. But my desire was once more detached from other considerations. One thing bothered me amongst others and that was—how long would I have to wait before she was mine? Would she want to go off to Fyzabad immediately Sheridan was dead and Traill had been tried? I did not doubt that she would. For by that time she would not be able to conceal her secret. Should I wait for her to have her cursed child before I pressed my attentions on her, before I began lavishing my money and gifts and avuncular goodness on her in a determined attempt to capture her affection? Or should I say I knew about everything and was willing to marry her? That superb gesture would surely impress her. She would be alone again in the world after all, except for Mrs. York and her husband. She did not seem to be the sort who made friends rapidly or plentifully. The courses open to me were somewhat bewildering. The latter seemed the best. For when I tired of her eventually her disposal would surely be an easy matter. There were other avenues besides divorce.

The night's storm had left the land cool and refreshing, satiated and satisfying. As we drew near the low hills and Mumbra I suggested that we have breakfast at the side of the hill where the railway entered the famous Parsik Tunnel and where a half sunken dredger reposed in the waters of the creek to the left. It was a charming spot.

An enjoyable feed and we were off again.

"I've never enjoyed anything so much as this for a long, long time!" enthused Susan. "Unless it was getting away from Malaya—knowing that I had got away I mean!"

Glancing into the motoring mirror at that moment I saw Mrs. York take her hand and give her a glance of sympathetic understanding.

"You poor child," she said. "Whenever I think of Malaya and the dreadful time everyone must have had my heart fails me. It must have been perfectly bloody, literally and figuratively. Thank God it's unlikely that we'll ever have the same horrors out here in India."

"Is it so unlikely?" asked Sheridan, turning and leaning over the seat. "It seems to me India is nearer now than she ever has been to fighting for her very life."

"And yet Congress still mess about with their talk about resisting invaders by non-aggression," I put in.

"Yes, and while they openly mouth sentiments that would earn for them the firing squad in any totalitarian country."

"How futile it all seems," murmured Susan. "This bickering and squabbling while so close is an enemy who is obviously out for domination of the East—if not the world. This is probably the Yellow Peril in earnest!"

"I listened the other night to what was supposed to be Subhas Chandra Bose speaking through the Eastern transmission of the German radio," said Mrs. York. "You should have heard the things he said! One was about the preparations that had been going on for a long time in India for an armed struggle in defence of her freedom—against the British. Apparently the creature seemed quite confident that there was going to be a glorious sort of second Indian Mutiny—only this time on a gigantic scale. I wonder."

"And so do I," said Sheridan. "Thank God for the beauty of these hills anyway. Look at that stream, Susan! This is Campoli, where everyone usually stokes up with a spot of cold water—their cars I mean—in preparation for the climb up the Ghats. Do you get sick whizzing round bends in a car?"

Susan laughed.

"No fear. And I'm a good sailor too, incidentally."

And so we drove on, up into the green beauty of the Ghats—one of the few things that moves my heart. If only it could reach my soul. But it can't, for I haven't a soul. I don't think such things exist. A heart is concrete after all.

It pulses. It is flesh and blood. When one is emotionally affected it either fills with or drains of blood, pumping faster or slower as the case may be. There is something about a heart you can believe. Cows have it. And dogs. And, I believe, even the lowly cockroach that makes itself so hated in Bombay. But has a cockroach a soul? And if it hasn't then what have we to make us believe that we have souls? I feel that when we die we die, blotted out like any other animal that is motivated by fuel in the shape of food and the action of blood and nerves and impulses and which just rots when such fuel and other stimuli are not forthcoming. "Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return." What a confession for the "Almighty" to make about the thing he fashioned "after himself."

I turned on the radio in the car and we climbed the Ghats to the haunting strains of "Begin the Beguine." Did I say haunting? I must be softening. But perhaps, in all of us, even we Portlands of the world, exists a secret love for beauty. It is a possibility.

Round the modern concrete bends we went, our ears turning deaf due to the sudden change in altitude. On and on, twisting and turning, till we came to the old railway bridge, swooping up into the last long stretch of steady climbing that approaches Khandalla.

Susan's eyes would not leave the grandeur of the rugged looking hillsides, the sinister attractiveness of the deep, dark valleys, with their lowermost reaches hidden in savage jungle.

"How awful it would be to fall down one of those precipitous valleys!" she shuddered.

"You wouldn't know very much about it by the time you reached the bottom!" was Sheridan's dry rejoinder. Talking of drops! We must show you the famous Tiger's Leap—or Tiger Slip as it's called too. It's a sheer cliff of a thousand feet. An old waterfall or something from the distant past. It's grim. I believe a Parsi girl once leapt down there when she had been disappointed in love."

"How terrible!" from Mrs. York. "What are men not responsible for in this world!"

This led to the inevitable heated discussion about the merits and demerits of men and women and it continued till we pulled in at the ornate, aluminium painted gates of Blue Dell.

## CHAPTER XVII

AFTER lunch we wandered in the garden. My *mali* had always tended it well and it had never been looking quite so attractive as it was now—or so I thought. The mango trees were beginning to boast of their ripening fruit while guavas and chickoos, citrons and oranges, papayas and jack fruit flourished in varying stages of readiness.

I caused a great deal of pleasure by the cine pictures I took of my guests as they moved amongst the flowers and trees. The setting was perfect for murder. Or would it be more perfect out under the quiet sky of the open—away up on the slopes of Butt Hill or Barometer Hill where the haloes of clouds or their absence foretold the weather, or on the long, hunchbacked Sakurpathar Hill with its spine of forest stretching back further into the blue-green slopes beyond?

"When will you be able to show us these pictures?" asked Susan. The change of air already appeared to be doing her good. Her cheeks had colour and her eyes sparkled like diamonds. She had put on a pair of tennis shorts for convenience and I could not help but admire her shapely, smooth skinned legs that tapered so attractively down to slender ankles and tiny feet. Her figure was still slim and lovely. There was as yet no sign of the strange ugliness that is always inseparable from the incredible mystery of birth. I brought myself back to earth with an effort to answer her question.

"Oh, as soon as we get back to Bombay. And by the way, I'm wanting you and Mark to do some film star work for me! I've written up a little play that should turn out quite amusing on the screen. We might even be able to get the Metro to put it on for a month!"

They all laughed and Mrs. York thought the idea was perfectly thrilling. Susan wanted to read the play right away so that she could learn her "lines" but I told her that it would all be much too simple for such elaborate arrangements.

"The only thing is," I finished, "I don't know where to stage it—here in the garden or out on the wild and woolly slopes of one of the hills around here."

"Oh, the hills every time!" there was reproach in Susan's eyes and voice. "How could you think of anything else? Granted your garden is lovely. But I'm sure you'd get a much better effect outdoors—right outdoors. Of course a lot depends on the kind of story. What's it about? I'm afraid my mind runs rather along the lines of brown skinned cowboys clattering over boulders and jumping ravines on their fiery mustangs."

"It's a love story," my tone was somewhat diffident. "Rather melodramatic, I'm afraid. But not a bad effort for a first timer."

"How lovely!" enthused Susan, smiling at Sheridan who, I thought, looked somewhat sheepish. It was obvious he did not like the idea of making a fool of himself doing something originated by a fat, dull-witted ass like myself. I felt too that he did not trust me yet. There was a queer look in his eyes. Truly I would never live down that business of the John Dutton Company! But I wouldn't have to live it down for long now.

Soon Sheridan would be well on the way to dust—dead in these lovely hills. For my note to Traill, coupled with his strange, moody, suddenly uncontrollable and passionate anger as I understand it could not but bear fruit. A grim fruit true. But a very necessary one.

"Sheridan, of course," I went on, "is the hero who suddenly goes crazy due to an unfortunate strain of madness in the family breaking loose in him. Just as he has saved you from the bold bad crook who had kidnapped you and was after a spot of hidden treasure on your estate, he begins to feel queer in the head. With the result that just as he is about to take you tenderly in his arms and tell you, with his soul behind it, that he loves you and will do so till the cows come home, he becomes a veritable Mr. Hyde. With teeth gnashing and eyes popping he grabs you, rips your dress and prepares to carry you off God knows where. You shriek for help but no help is forthcoming. Louder and louder come your cries when suddenly the whole scene on the screen will change. You and your husband, Sheridan, will be shown peacefully asleep in bed—or rather tossing about in a nightmare brought on by one of your pathetic attempts at making a beef steak and kidney pie. One of his arms will have been flung across your neck in his sleep. It has all been a dream, in other words. Bit hackneyed, but it'll give us a spot of fun."

"Splendid!" said Mrs. York. "Now that's my idea of how everything terrible should end. This war itself should prove to be nothing more than a dream."

Even Sheridan looked less sheepish after a few moments, especially when Susan showed her keenness.

"Oh go on with you Mark!" she chided him when he said he would feel an ass, "it's only a bit of fun! We'll have many a laugh at it when we get back to Bombay and Gerald shows it at the flat."

"What about me?" asked Mrs. York plaintively of a sudden. "What about managing a part for me? Is it possible?"

I smiled, showing my teeth in rather a vicious manner, I'm afraid. But she did not appear to notice anything out of the ordinary.

"I have a part for you, as a matter of fact, Mrs. York. You are Susan's gin drinking mother who goes off into the jungle for a real good binge after selling Susan's jewellery at the conclusion of her marriage. In her dream Susan sees you disappearing into the trees and later when the mad hero is carrying her off, she sees remnants of your clothes hanging about, plus a bone or two and also your gin bottle. A panther has liquidated you."

"Oh that's all right," said the cheery soul. "As long as I've got something to do—even if it's only disappearing amongst the trees and down a panther's throat."

"We'll choose the site for the whole thing tomorrow then," I said. "All agreed?"

They nodded. They had accepted the idea of the whole thing splendidly. It had only taken me an hour to write, this stupid play. But the angle I had taken for the final denouement of my plan seemed ideal.

"Then we can spend the rest of tomorrow on a little rehearsal on the set itself or here in the garden. The day after that we can put over the real thing. It should be a success."

If Traill took my note as genuine and crept unseen to the "location" of the film, it would be a success. For I would be hidden behind some bushes and Mrs. York would be "disappearing amongst the trees." And, after all, if he did not react as I wanted him to, well, there would not be much harm done in the shape of suspicion attaching to me.

\* \* \*

Next morning we walked off on our "location" hunting. I felt personally that the scene should not be too far away. At

first I had pictured the stage being set at the sheer grim drop of Tiger's Slip—one thousand feet of perpendicular rock face. But it had not taken me long to realise that Traill would stand no chance against Sheridan in a possible hand to hand struggle, the sort of struggle that might ensue if Traill was not quick enough with the *kris* I knew he kept as a memento of his Pacific wanderings. Besides, the fall itself was about three and a half miles away, and apart from that being rather a distance to ask any cripple to take himself to, I remembered that the villagers in that area had an irritating habit of crowding round visitors and begging for money in reward for heaving rocks over the cliff edge in order to show them what a long time elapsed before they hit the bottom.

No, it would have to be closer to home. The obvious answer seemed to be Barometer Hill which was not far from Blue Dell and which got its name from the fact that one could always judge the weather in Lonavla from it—if the hill was clear, the weather would be clear, if mist hung round it, there would be rain. On the other hand, the plateau on the top of Butt Hill where it blended into the Sakurpathar eminence with its forest cresting its elongated back, might be the ideal place. I had done some shooting in the Sakurpathar Forest and I suddenly decided that the edge of the plateau before entering the denseness of the forest must indeed be the spot we choose. Mrs. York could disappear into the trees quite well there. And the forest was the obvious place for panther. I found myself wishing that one of the beasts *would* indeed pounce on her during our play.

"My word, look at that marvellous lake!" said Susan as we passed the Tata Lake, one of the many the famous business firm had created in these hills with the dams of their gigantic hydro-electric schemes.

"That's nothing really," Sheridan dismissed the rather small lake airily. "Wait till you see Walwan and Bushi Lakes. They're really impressive. Blue as the sky. And you can get a good bit of fishing there on a small scale—if you bribe the watchman on duty to look the other way!"

I find it hard to describe the scene looking down from Shakurpathar Hill—or Butt Hill as it is known before it emerges into Sakurpathar. There is something fascinating about it which eludes my inexperienced pen. It is like a painting, the railway station snuggling amongst the comparatively small group of Lonavla's bazaar buildings and railway colony—the great pylons carrying Tata's cables cutting into the sky—the electrified railway itself running south east to Poona—the streams and lakes. It was indeed a fit setting for murder.

Traill would only have to walk a mile to the foot of the hill. The climb up would be pretty stiff but I was sure he could manage it if he were feeling determined enough about destroying Sheridan. I would see to it in my note that he got up before us so that he would be in position when we arrived.

That afternoon while the others slept I wrote the fatal note to Traill, an anonymous note in a disguised handwriting, purporting to come from "one who knew and liked you in Fyzabad."

"Dear Traill," ran the letter, "I am sure you still love Susan Mannerling. That is why I write you this letter. There is another—a man named Sheridan, whom I believe you know—who is making a nuisance of himself where she is concerned. Not only a nuisance but a menace of himself would be perhaps the correct term. He has already taken advantage of her. She is with child. She seems to be hypnotised by him. Perhaps it is the evil in him—the cold, cynical evil." (I remembered with a chuckle how Traill used to hate Sheridan's cynicism.) "I overheard him today persuading her to accompany him for a walk on Sakurpathar Hill tomorrow. She seemed afraid to go but I know she is terrified of him and so says nothing to me. I have often wanted to encourage her to speak but she sort of shrinks away. I feel sure that he means her harm again tomorrow—I don't know why—I just feel it. I am powerless to help her, I'm afraid, for certain reasons, one being that I am ill and bed-ridden at the moment. So if you would help her, be somewhere in the edge of the forest, where the plateau meets it, tomorrow at about nine in the morning. I heard him say they'd leave here at nine. Please don't try and find my house—it would only complicate matters needlessly and I am not strong enough to stand any trouble. Besides, I want you to have proof of what I have said. From your vantage point at the edge of the plateau you will be able to see them after they have gained the plateau itself and will be able to follow them or keep them under observation from there. I think he exerts some terrible, incredible sort of spell over her—something you might only think exists in novels. Later, if you can save her from this man and would like to meet me, I shall be only too glad to see you. You could write to Box Number 3."

That, I felt with no small measure of satisfaction, as I closed the flap of the envelope and fastened it, should fetch him. It did sound a trifle melodramatic, true—and unreal—but then Traill's mind was an author's mind, a mind that lived in fiction and fictionary ideas. I knew he had always hated Sheridan—had hated both of us, for that matter. This

note should put the finishing touches to everything or else my knowledge of psychology was all wrong.

Now, could I afford to post the letter? Obviously no. It would reach him too late. It must go by hand. I couldn't send any of our servants for he knew them. I wondered suddenly, with despair at my heart, whether he knew anyway that we were up here in Lonavla. It was a smallish place and the news of week end and holiday visitors got round amongst the servants and milkmen and breadmen incredibly fast.

Taking a short stroll out into the sunlight I soon spotted an urchin tending some goats. I beckoned him over and promised him "plenty baksheesh" if he would deliver this letter at Blue Dell. I gave him instructions how to find the place and told him to deliver the letter to the sahib's servant and not direct to the sahib—also to say if he was asked who had given him the letter, that it had been another servant he did not know. I told him in Marathi, which I understand and can speak fairly well, that if he followed these instructions to the letter I would give him extra baksheesh. Above all, I stressed, the sahib must not know it was I who had given him the letter.

He seemed an intelligent youngster and I felt safe enough. I told him I would stay where I was and wait for his return in case anything went wrong and also to give him the extra baksheesh. He went swiftly off down the rough roadway and I settled myself under cover of some bushes—just in case Traill happened to be out for a stroll. It did not really matter, I suppose, if he did see me, but it was just possible that he might connect the letter with my presence in Lonavla and become too suspicious to act. He has a sharp mind.

Within ten minutes the boy was back. He had no letter. I gave him a rupee, which sum staggered him. But he appeared to be uncomfortable and did not run off as soon as he had got it. At last he managed to get out what was worrying him. It appeared that Traill's toothless old servant said he had instructions to take any letters that came but the sahib was not in the house, having gone out camping.

I thought I would seize this opportunity of going along and finding out exactly how long it would be before Traill got back. When I walked up the unkempt drive of his house and compared it with mine, I felt a momentary pang of pity. Poor Traill, he had never had much from the world. And then the pity left me and I chuckled. He wouldn't have to struggle much longer against life's cruel odds!

His toothless, gruesome old servant had always filled me with horror. Perhaps it was natural that a cripple should

choose such a fantastic factotum. He was blind in one eye and almost blind in the other. Round his head he wore a tattered old red puggree. He spoke quite passably broken English.

"Traill Sahib he gone for walk."

"When?"

The creature waved vague hands. He was so old I think he had lost count of time itself.

"I think yesterday. Maybe the day before that. I don't know. But he leave a letter for you or Sheridan Sahib. He say if you come to give you drinks and give you the letter and wait for him to come home."

"Where is the letter?"

He fumbled senilely on the centre table of the room which was covered with a pile of unopened letters and newspapers. At last his groping fingers found what he was searching for. How he knew it was the letter, with his peering eyes and failing senses I could not for the life of me say. I ripped it open. It was undated.

"I've been expecting you," said the note, "I thought you would try and get in touch with me. No one can suddenly disappear like I did and not have his acquaintances, especially those he lives with, ask questions! How is Susan? Well, I hope. Have a drink. My old boy will fix you up. I may be back today or I may camp out for a few days. I'm off onto Sakurpathar for a shoot. I'll see you later. By the way, tell Susan to write Mr. John Andrews, 23-X, Old Secretariat Road, Old Delhi when she gets time. I believe he knows something about property."

I swore as I folded the letter. That ruined my whole plan! The schemes of mice and men! But there *was* a chance, of course, as his note said, that he would return tonight. So I thought I might as well leave my note with the old man. It was no good trying to swear him to secrecy about my visit, especially as he did not know the faked note was mine. But from the sound of Traill's letter it seemed that he already knew we were in Lonavla. He had probably gone off in a state of distress, wondering whether he should renew his contact with Susan or just lie hidden up. Nevertheless it was very unusual, practically unheard of, for anyone to camp out in the Forest of Sakurpathar alone.

Perhaps he had guessed that neither Sheridan nor I would have revealed or would now reveal the existence of Bright Nook to Susan, knowing that he had loved her and that (from my report about incidents in Fyzabad) she, may be, loved him. His use of psychology had been correct. At

least where I was concerned. And, too, I think, where Sheridan was concerned. For, although Sheridan knew Traill owned Bright Nook, I was sure he had not mentioned the fact to Susan. Nor had he at any time expressed the supposition that Traill might have gone there when he had disappeared. Yes, Traill had been better washed out of the paths of both of us.

I walked home thoughtfully, leaving the note where it was. If Traill did come home in time, then he would be at the appointed place. If he did not I couldn't very well propose to postpone our trip to the hill indefinitely. There was only one sensible thing for it. I must take my chance. Perhaps kind Fate might send him our way when we were conducting our movie acting. If not, some other day and some other plan would have to suffice. If he had still not returned by tomorrow evening I would remove my note from his house—in case I wanted to use and could use this same plan at some future date. Of course if he returned to the house during the day then the whole plan was ruined. I was in a quandary. I decided to take the chance. There were other plans and other days. Besides, he might not return while we were in Lonavla—if he had decided not to renew his acquaintanceship with Susan. This way there was at least a chance that the thing would come off. The other way the odds were too great against. It appeared fairly obvious that he had rushed off into the forest as soon as he knew we were in Lonavla.

Next day we reclimbed the hill, Mrs. York puffing along courageously as before and refusing to stop. I found my eyes searching each group of bushes and behind each rock for Traill.

At last we began our acting. Still in the hope that Traill might be somewhere about I placed myself so that I was cut off from view from the forest. The ridiculous playlet went its way and the three performers did their work well, I must admit. Came the moment when Mrs. York staggered off into the forest to complete her drunken orgy. Off she went realistically amongst the trees. I had asked her if she would be afraid of wild animals but she had scorned the very idea.

"Men are worse than wild animals," she had retorted characteristically. "And I've managed them all my life. So why should I be afraid of a poor panther. And they never come out so near the edge of the forest anyway, do they?"

That was a fairly accurate supposition. I had roamed the practically unfrequented and overgrown pathways of Sakurpathar and I had never seen anything near the edge of the forest. Indeed it was seldom that one came across even a

living human being up there. In all my wanderings there I had only seen one—a khartori or native hillman, practically naked, carrying a bundle of wood on his head. Yes, Shakur-pathar can be very lonely.

I trained my camera on Mrs. York's figure till it disappeared in the trees. Then I switched back to the laughing Susan and Sheridan for the next stage of their part.

Barely half a minute had passed when we were startled by the most unearthly scream from Mrs. York. She came rushing out from the trees, looking ridiculous with her skirt half torn off by either brambles or some wild animal. But no animal pursued her. She reached us, gasping, unable to articulate for a few seconds. At last she managed to speak, pointing a shaking finger towards the forest.

"In there," she gasped. "It's dreadful, dreadful!"

She clung to Susan spasmodically, all her courage gone. Susan tried to soothe her.

"What, Vera dear—what's in there?"

But the very thought of it, whatever it was, seemed too much for Mrs. York. She suddenly burst out crying. Sheridan and I made a cautious approach towards the trees. There seemed to be nothing visible. No wild animals anyway—nor the scent of one. We pushed our way in amongst the trees and undergrowth and looked about us.

"My God—there!" said Sheridan suddenly. He had been searching a little to my right. I moved over to him and we stood gazing at the thing that had alarmed Mrs. York.

It was a human skeleton that lay in a scattered little heap under a tree, but the skull, caught in the loop that had slipped upwards towards the cheek bones from the neck it had once encircled still dangled motionlessly from the end of a frayed, weather beaten looking length of rope attached to a branch of the tree. The jackals had obviously not been able to reach the body before disintegration set in. And panthers scorn the already dead.

We went closer. And suddenly I stopped and picked up something that lay amongst the white bones of the chest. It was a dull circular scrap of gold—the charm Traill had already worn. I remember reflecting that it was queer how, even in death, the bones of Traill's right leg were still grotesquely twisted.

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## *Part Three: The Story of Mark Sheridan*

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### CHAPTER XVIII

Give me that man  
That is no passion's slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of hearts.

*Shakespeare.*

I FOUND May Barton extremely intriguing right from the first moment I met her. We were introduced during a tennis at-home in the Qudsia Gardens at Delhi. Thinking back to those few years ago I wonder now what there really was about her that was unique. Time is apt to take the gilt off many a species of gingerbread I suppose. And yet, writing as if today were the day I met her, I can say she was altogether exceptional.

She was the quiet type that instinctly convinced me that—although she did not say much for herself—she had brains. Brains enough, anyway, to listen uncontributorsively to the futile chatterings of others. I did not associate her, somehow, with the type of dull young woman who sits like a stuffed dummy, devoid of any social urge to keep the party going by taking an intelligent interest in the conversation.

She was small and rather lackadaisical in her bearing—and in her tennis. And yet, when she muffed shots through sheer laziness I felt my heart go out to her in pity. As I felt my gorge rise at the sniggers of other players,

Unlike most women who can't play the game very well, she did not indulge in futile giggling or cries of "Oh sorry partner!" when shots were muffed. I admired her courage for taking things like that in her stride and found myself thinking back to those awful days when I as a novice used to be glared at for my crass inefficiency at the game. And when I found, slightly to my consternation, that she had been playing the game for five years, in exactly the same manner

for each of the five, I found myself making frantic excuses for her and finally deciding that the poor girl had guts, anyway, for continuing to play when she was really not cut out for it at all. Others, with less spunk, would have packed in after a year.

"Oh hard luck!" I remember calling to her for the twentieth time that first set I had with her. "It's just that you were a little out of place Miss Barton—No Man's Land in tennis. Don't worry, you and I will show them after this."

Her soft dark eyes, mysterious and inscrutable, were turned on me and she smiled gratefully. Of course we didn't show anybody anything, but when I saw her home she let me see that she was terribly grateful for "the sporting way" in which I had reacted to "her terrible play"—She let me carry her net of balls and her racquet. Yes, maybe you smile. But I was twenty-six then and this was the first time I had felt a real urge towards understanding a girl better.

I had come near falling in love desperately, in Durham, with my brother's wife, but it had only been the raging calf love of an adolescent. I had always had many friends amongst the opposite sex, good sports and hard drinkers too. But love had never entered into our relationship. We had sometimes painted Delhi, where I had my own commercial art studio, red. But love, with all its queer little mysteries, remained taboo. Not for any of them had I felt the strange spark that makes a man think every fault of a woman a virtue, every physical defect an attraction, that inspires him may be to the tender desire of wanting to kiss her feet every now and then (even if she has just walked the bazaars), or show her he really does love her by using her own tooth-brush, or by ridiculing her protests when she says "Oh darling, don't hold me so close—I'm positively smothered in perspiration after that game—you'll hate me!"

With May it was different. She was not beautiful. Nor was she pretty. She did not really have a good figure, except for her shapely legs and well-moulded, mature breasts. Her features were plain, her chin a shade large—and firm. But her ears were small and dainty, her olive skin was superb. Her hands, slow and graceful in their movements, with slender fingers that yet seemed firm with pulsing flesh were the kind of hands that fascinate a man. But it was her eyes that dominated her whole personality. Unreadable, mysterious, of a soft dark brown, the pupil hardly distinguishable from the iris, they promised all sorts of wonderful things to the man who won her and yet promised—nothing. They fascinated me to the end, those eyes. When I thought they were most tender and her heart ready to pour out its warmth in a flood of affectionate words, she would say her

tailor had come that afternoon, had made her the most delightful pair of slacks and a blouse. When I thought they were hard and angry she would suddenly fling herself into my arms and strain her body fiercely against mine, her red lips and gleaming teeth cruelly pressing down on my mouth, sometimes causing my lips to bleed.

It was strange how we first began to love. Strange and beautiful to me. The first indication that she felt anything for me was about a week after our first meeting. I was again walking home with her after tennis. She only lived about half a mile from the club and I myself had always used a bicycle, leaving my car at home for I held that one easily caught a chill in a car after exercise.

I happened to be rather quiet on this occasion. "Thinking of your loved one?" she asked me suddenly, fixing me with her dark eyes. "Your brother's wife?"

"What on earth!" I gasped. "May, what in the wide world made you say that?"

She waved an airy hand, a faint, a very faint smile curving her lips.

"Oh every boy who has a brother who has an attractive a wife as the woman you showed me in the photograph in your drawing room falls in love with her. It's just one of the ordinary little mysteries of life. Seldom known to fail. It's like getting measles."

"You seem very cynical!"

"Oh dear no, I just use my commonsense. Have you ever loved anyone—really seriously I mean?"

"No-no. I can't say I have.—I must admit I *did* think an awful lot of Lorna. And at one time I nearly lost my head. But I got ever it."

"Are you *sure* you didn't lose your head?" there seemed to be an inflection of disappointment in her voice. "Not so far as to indulge in even one small really passionate kiss?"

Looking into her eyes then I saw a flame deep down in them. I knew I was not mistaken. It was the only thing about her eyes, that flame, that never deceived me the times out of number I saw it.

I shook my head and then stammered as I remembered I had behaved rather, ridiculously the night before leaving Durban. I had suddenly grabbed Lorna and had kissed her wildly before she could move, telling her I loved her and would always do so. Jack had not been there. I told May about it, laughing it off. The flame in her eyes persisted.

"Don't let's go home straight away," she said. "Let's go in the gardens. They're lovely at this time of the evening. There are plenty of seats and it's so quiet."

The manhood in me sensed some subtle form of feminine invitation in her words. We strolled, outwardly nonchalant, along the green bordered fragrant pathways of the gardens. To our left, practically hidden by three oleander bushes, gleamed the white paint of a garden seat.

"Let's go and sit down," May murmured. "I'm tired after those sets, aren't you?"

The soft summer dusk was falling and a gentle breeze rustled the tree tops. My heart was thumping with some strange, unfathomable expectation. We seated ourselves and talked of the casual things—of tennis, of the new cinema that was being built in New Delhi, of the picture that was showing at the old Capitol Theatre in Kashmere Gate. As we talked the light faded.

May moved closer to me of a sudden. I couldn't see her eyes clearly. They were just two pools of darkness in the white blur of her face.

"It's getting a bit chilly," she whispered.

Trembling at my temerity, my heart in my mouth and thrills of expectancy running through my body, I put my arm round her.

"Is that better?" I asked, loudly cheerful. "I think you'll be warmer like that."

"It's wonderful," she murmured and rested her soft cheek against mine. And then my blood was on fire and my brain a mass of foolish confusion as she took my hand in her two slim warm ones and pressed it to each of her breasts in turn.

"Mark!" she whispered. "Love me, Mark! No one's ever shown any interest in me. And I've never felt about anyone as I've felt about you."

My lips found hers in the darkness. How can I explain, except to young lovers, the utterly breathless, totally unbelievable ecstasy of those moments? I held her to me almost desperately, afraid that she would disappear at any moment, a mere figment of my imagination, conjured up by my desire.

There is something about young love that is magical. There is a tune to one's heart beats that defies the efforts of the greatest musicians to capture it exactly. There is eagerness and nobility and ambition and tenderness wrapped up together with unfathomable exquisite physical appeal.

We were very happy as the weeks went by. Sometimes her strange mysteriousness frightened me. But mostly it fascinated me, lured me on further and further to solve it. But it seemed insoluble. Always there was that sense of contradiction. She would do or say something totally different from what one expected.

When I heard whispers from one or two of my friends about her past I championed her with fire. When I was advised against pursuing my affair with her I said we were going to be married in the autumn.

The autumn! That magic word! That magic season when the russet leaves and warm lush skies tell you that the parching summer is ended.

May was not keen to marry me so early. She wanted to put it off till I had a much more substantial income.

"Love in a cottage is usually a failure," she said.

I agreed. By the spring I was earning double what I had been earning in the autumn. We were married. Somehow, in that first week of our life together, I had the uncomfortable feeling that May was laughing at me.

We went up to Murree for our honeymoon. I had been educated there in one of Henry Lawrence's schools before going home again to finish my education at a public school. I took May to our quaint little school chapel there, a delightful little building that will always live in my memory. I remember the Sunday evenings of my schooldays when we would file out of its brightly lit exterior, past our venerable Principal, into the dusk. The chapel was perched right on top of a hill and commanded a superb view of the valleys that rolled down towards what had been in the very early days the Tonga Road. The only line of communication with Rawalpindi had been the Tong Road and along it, perspiring ladies and gentlemen and children had undertaking days of travel to reach the coolth of the delightful hill station.

Murree! I can see it now in all its various caparisons—the light green and flowery mantle of Spring; the warm, drowsy cape of summer, with the carpet of pine needles fragrant and soft and the *kastoor* singing its heart out to the sapphire sky; the red gold gown of autumn, with the chestnuts falling and the sun losing its warmth early in the afternoon; the snow white cloak of winter, pure and undefiled, with the hill slopes solitary and dignified and the isolated spiral of smoke from some lone resident's chimney reaching high into the cold blue sky, broadcasting its story of fragrantly burning pine logs and cones to the quiet universe about it.

Why is it we feel so deeply the memories of life? Life consists of memories, does it not? There is no future and but a brief fleeting present that is gone as the clock ticks each second into oblivion.

How many of those memories are really ugly? But a few we find. And it is because of their very fewness that they live so long with us, so bitterly. The death of a son or daughter or loved one, the quarrel with a trusted friend, the duplicity of a lover or wife.

Our honeymoon gave me some of the rarest memories of my life. Vivid and pulsing with life and love, they are with me now as I write. We spent a month in Murree and were loth to say goodbye to the Spring. But time marches forward and waits for none. We were soon speeding down the twisting, turning, utterly fascinating motor road to Rawalpindi, saying farewell to each fresh canvas of scenery as it was unrolled before our eyes by each bend in the road. Down in the valleys was the never forgettable glint of streams and the green of young maize crops waiting for the summer sun to bring them to maturity.

Life was very beautiful. As was the love I felt for the girl by my side. I took in every line of her calm, mysterious, strong face. And I thanked my lucky stars that I was alive and in love.

Back in Delhi we began to settle down to being an experienced married couple. I outlined a plan for a life together that could only end in golden and diamond weddings. And May would look at me with those strange dark brown eyes and smile and agree with me. The only thing she disagreed with was my plan for children and a noisy nursery.

"I can't stand children," she said many times when I broached the subject. She would wrinkle up her nose and add, "I don't know why."

I remember it used to strike a queer note in me. I couldn't understand a woman who did not want or did not like children. I had never heard of one anyway, in my young life.

But she got her way. We didn't try to have children. And we were extremely happy. Until the arrival of a man May had known in Calcutta. His name was Rushton and he was in the paint and roofing business. An elderly man who seemed to have plenty of money and an exceedingly attractive personality. But it was the personality that sold you things. There was no warmth in it. It was a salesman's personality, there was no getting away from that. And he called May, in an airy, cheery, harmless sort of manner—"sweetheart."

## CHAPTER XIX

I COULD not dance in those days. The thought of attempting it in a crowded dance hall paralysed me with a flood of self-consciousness. When May had asked me if I could dance and I had said no, she claimed she would teach me in a few days. The lessons had begun to a gramophone in our drawing room. But they had never been completed. Super-sensitive, I had been hurt by her suddenly impatient ridicule of my futile efforts. After which no cajolery on her part could get me to try again.

And then came that particular New Year dance in New Delhi that I will always remember for the blackness of soul it brought out in me. The invitation to the dance was Rushton's.

"But Mark doesn't dance," had said May, only a faint trace of playful spitefulness and reproach in her dark eyes. Rushton was jovially astounded. His small eyes had positively gleamed at the enormity of my social offence.

"Don't dance? But good God man, everyone dances! It's essential these days. Tennis, bridge and dancing. If you don't go in for those you'll never really be happy."

"I'm quite happy, thanks," I said. I remember wondering briefly if I was.

"Well, anyway you *must* come along old chap," he urged. "May must be dying without her dancing. She was one of the best dancers in Calcutta you know. Was well known from Firpo's to the Casino at the Grand."

"Indeed?" I felt like crashing something on to his partly bald head.

"Yes sir! Could she swing a light fantastic leg or could she!"

All this time May was looking cool and collected, entirely unselfconscious, unperturbed. It was useless searching her eyes for a message. They were cloaked again in mystery. I didn't really know what she was thinking but I could not

discard the feeling that she was hurt at my inability to dance, at my apparent reluctance to attend this one.

"Of course I'll come," I said suddenly, my mind made up. After all I could have a few drinks and watch them dance. They were old friends. He was almost an old man. I should not be feeling this sudden, nagging jealousy.

But the jealousy grew worse as, almost without blinking, I watched them while they circled the crowded ballroom, close in each other's arms, talking and laughing. Once Rushton apparently made a devastatingly funny remark, after just having looked in my direction and caught me staring. May had to throw her head back in order to appreciate to the full the flavour of his words. That night was the first time in my life that I knew, for a cold incontrovertible fact, that I could have done murder.

After each dance they would return gaily chatting, May fanning herself with her handkerchief, for, although the winter is cold in Delhi, a ballroom packed with humanity can be hot—in more ways than one apparently.

"Mark dear, what a *pity* you don't dance!" said May after the tenth dance. Rushton ordered drinks for all of us. Looking into May's eyes, sick at heart and disgusted with myself for my stupid inefficiency at this apparently futile but important modern art, I suddenly felt cold horror stab at my vitals. For, deep in her eyes, so mysterious as a rule, so unexpressive except for one impulse, was the flame I knew so well. Was that urge she felt for me—or for the creature who had held her in his arms all night, swinging her this way and that, their feet and bodies moving in unison, his legs sometimes almost between her knees?

When the hour of midnight struck and everyone started wishing their friends and relations a happy new year in a babble of sound, I thought the kiss May gave me was somewhat perfunctory while on Rushton, to my inflamed mind, she lavished one of extreme warmth. Perhaps I was mistaken, misled by my jealousy. She got up after a minute or so, while the din of well-wishing continued, and said she was going to powder her nose.

"Excuse me a moment," I said to Rushton. "I just want to have a word with May. I'll be back in a jiffy."

We threaded our way through the throng. I could feel my lips tight across my teeth. I sensed in May a suppressed knowledge of my jealousy and a burst of temper to answer anything I had to say. Out in the cool air of the practically deserted passage I caught her arm and swung her round roughly to face me.

"Just a minute," I said. "You heard me say I wanted a word with you."

Her mouth was sulky. Her eyes unexpressive.

"Well? You've been behaving like a log of wood all night—and there's been something on your mind too," she said defiantly. "What's the bee in your bonnet?"

"The bee? Oh ha! Ha! There's no bee in my bonnet May—only a badger—a bald headed old badger old enough to be your great grandfather!"

"What in heaven's name are you talking about? And let go my arm—you're hurting me."

I exerted even more pressure on her soft olive tinted arm.

"I'm talking about the way you've been dancing all night—bodies practically entwined, laughing at me. It's a wonder you didn't both strip and make love in the good old fashioned way."

"Mark, you're drunk!" her voice was a trifle cracked.

"Drunk!" I snorted. "On those miserable chota pegs! If you cared for me at all and my miserable inability to dance left you with anything but amused contempt, you would have at least suggested sitting out one or two of the numbers. But no....."

"Don't shout!" she snapped suddenly, the first time I had ever heard her speak in anything but a caressing, carefully modulated tone. It cooled me down somewhat.

"And that kiss of yours," I hissed. "I've never had such a peck from you in all our married life!"

She threw up her head, the firm line of her jaw emphasised to me in that moment, the peculiar inscrutability of her eyes, even in her anger, amazing me.

"What did you want me to do Mark?" her voice was cutting. "Did you want me to wrap myself around you, fasten my lips to yours and drain the life out of you—in public?"

"That's a crude way of putting it but you certainly managed to give old Methuselah there a hearty salutation! And I noticed plenty of other sweethearts and wives and husbands were not ashamed to kiss each other as they should at a season like this, public or no public!"

She made an impatient little sound and tried to disengage her arm.

"You're being utterly ridiculous!" she snapped again. "Please let go my arm. I told you you're hurting me."

"And that light in your eyes!" I almost snarled. "Do you think a man doesn't get to know the unfailing signs of certain moods in his wife? I've seen that flame so many times in your eyes and it's always nearly driven me crazy with joy. But tonight it has nearly driven me to murder!"

"My God—you are crazy!" her voice was shrill, and fearing she was going to lose her self control and scream I let her go. She turned and made for the ladies' cloak room at once, leaving me with the sense that I had made the biggest fool of myself that I ever could have made. Remorse took me in its cold, revealing grip. I saw myself and my behaviour as a stranger would have seen them. And I tried to imagine how hurt May must be. During the few minutes she was gone and I waited in the passage for her, I lost every scrap of anger, distrust and jealousy. I saw myself for the fool and cad I was at heart. When she reappeared I rushed up to her and took her hand, almost maudlin in my eagerness to show her that I knew what a swine I was.

"May darling," I muttered swiftly, "I don't know how to apologise. Oh my dear—I know how you must be feeling, but forgive me. Put it down to the fact that I love you—really love you. It's the first time I've seen anyone hold you in his arms. I must have been crazy. I promise you nothing like this will ever happen again."

The words tumbled out one after another, like the tokens from a jack-pot machine when someone has rung the bell. May looked at me doubtfully for a moment and then a mysterious sort of smile appeared on her features, her eyes smoky and unreadable as ever. She squeezed my hand.

"Poor Mark," she murmured. "I know how you must have felt too. There's really nothing to forgive. It was rather selfish of me. But I've felt just as you've felt when I've seen some other woman playing tennis with you."

She paused to kiss me suddenly, warmly.

"And that flame," she whispered, "was for you! I was feeling so selfish dancing there and leaving you alone and I had just made up my mind to make it up to you—oh!—a hundred fold when we got home!"

I can remember the youthful, spontaneous and utterly ridiculous tears of relief and remorse and love springing to my eyes and my heroic effort to control myself. We went back to the lively scene of gaiety. To the elderly, slightly protuberant eyed Rushton.

\* \* \*

But after this incident I saw Rushton in true perspective. He was indeed a friendly old fellow and good company. And

it was quite obvious that he never meant anything with all the "sweethearts" and "honeys" he used on May. Your true blackguard would not be so open. He would hide his feelings well. I endeavoured with pitiful perseverance to make up to May for my outburst at the Carlton Hotel. I couldn't do enough for her. And she was sweetly forgiving. She kept telling me that I was silly to let it worry me so—there was really nothing to forgive and we would be happy always in future. No more fighting. We sealed the pact with a kiss.

One Sunday we arranged a trip out by Rushton's car to see one or two of Delhi's crumbling, historic, and fascinatingly romantic relics. We arranged to take lunch and tea out with us. The Emperor Shah Alum's tomb was the first on our list. When we had headed off Alipur Road in the direction of the tomb, I found Rushton was a mine of information about this tragic old Moghul, one of the last of a declining line.

"Tragic old bird, was Shah Alum," he said as we approached the tomb. "He was weak and yet possessed almost incredible courage. He was dignified too, and had great qualities of patience and mercy. Too much so, in fact. People took advantage of him. People like Ismail Beg and Gholam Kadir for instance."

"Oh tell us about them," urged May enthusiastically. The ruins of Delhi and the stories attached to them have been one subject she has always professed interest in. She went on, "I didn't know you were a historian, Ralph."

Rushton smiled easily.

"You know I've always been as interested in Indian history as yourself," he said. "But especially in the little episode that stood out towards the end of poor old Shah Alum's life and reign."

"Yes, you really must give us the story, whatever it is," I insisted, adding my entreaty to May's.

"Well, if you're both really ready to be regaled! Visualise Delhi then, in the bad old days, before the Jumna River as you know it now had sought a new course, before its placid waters had ceased to flow by the very walls of the Red Fort."

"In 1788 old Shah Alum, about sixty-nine years old, was forced at sword point to descend from his throne, the Rohilla's chief, Gholam Kadir, being the dirty dog who insisted. Kadir stuck a totally feeble and ineffectual relic of the house of Timoor in the old man's place giving him the title of Bedar Bakht. The old emperor and his household were imprisoned. Gholam Kadir's companion, one Ismail Beg, had

not entered the Fort but camped outside waiting for the results of what he thought were Gholam Kadir's friendly negotiations with the Emperor. When he discovered his companion's treachery and bloody tactics, he was pretty wild.

"After he'd kicked old Shah Alum off his throne the bright Gholam went on the prowl for treasure. He wanted something really snappy. Was not a bit pleased with the poor stuff he had filched from his puppet Bedar Bakht. He suddenly got the brilliant idea that the old Emperor was just the man who would know about the hiding place of his family treasure. He wasn't to know that only a short time previously Shah Alum had been reduced to melting his own private plate in order to keep together a small body of horse. And even if he had heard it, he was bull-headed and ferociously stupid enough not to have believed it. Anyway, the Emperor denied the existence of any such treasure.

"I think it was about the 30th of July, 1788 that Gholam Kadir gave old Shah Alum a spot of real corporal chastisement in order to get his secret out of him. When it was not forthcoming he had some of the Emperor's ladies lashed as well, as a persuasive gesture. But the poor old devil couldn't very well divulge a secret that existed solely in the imagination, semi animal and greed crazed, of his enemy.

"Again, on the 1st of August or thereabouts, the Emperor was whipped. But the imagined secret was as far away from Gholam's grasp as ever.

"'If,' the Emperor is reported to have said at last, 'if you think I have any concealed treasures, they must be within me. Rip open my bowels and satisfy yourself.'"

"Oh how dreadful!" said May in a queer voice. Glancing at her I saw that her expression was as mysterious as ever, but deep in her eyes was the flame I knew so well. It baffled me for a moment. I could not connect it with Rushton's story. Then as she slid her warm hand into mine, I understood. She was thinking of me more than of the gruesome story. Rushton continued.

"The baffled Rohilla smashed up the glorious throne in the Diwan-i-Khas merely for its gold and precious stones. Then he spent three days digging up all the floors of the palace in search of the 'hidden treasure' which had by now become an obsession with him. Then, on about the 10th of August, he brought the Emperor out again and asked once more for the secret. Once again the old man insisted that he had no treasure.

"'Then,' said Gholam Kadir, 'you are of no further use to the world. You shall be blinded.'

"The old fellow pleaded for the eyes which, he said, had grown dim with the daily study of the word of God. So, to show he understood, this blighter of a Kadir tortured the old man's sons and grandsons—who had crowded round when the argument had hotted up—instead.

"As the torture began the courage of Shah Alum again came to the fore. He said 'I would rather lose my sight than gaze upon scenes like these.'

"Without any hesitation at all, and before you could say Jack Robinson, the Rohilla jumped on the old man, threw him down, knelt on his chest, and struck out one of his eyes with his dagger."

A gasp from May drew my gaze to her again. A queer look was on her face, half shocked, half smiling. And in her eyes the flame burned deep. Her hand closed tighter on mine. Rushton's voice went on, vibrant, compelling.

"Then Gholam Kadir called on a bystander, apparently a member of the Emperor's household, to complete the job of blinding. On his refusing Kadir killed him and his followers took out the old Emperor's remaining eye.

"Meanwhile, outside the walls of the Red Fort, or Red Palace, where but the smallest whisper of these ghastly goings on had reached, Ismail Beg suddenly realised he hadn't been far wrong about the treachery of Gholam Kadir. He had lost faith in him during the wait and had made private negotiations with Rana Khan of the Mahrattas, as far as we know to help Shah Alum against Kadir.

"On the 18th of August the Mahrattas attacked the Fort from the left bank of the Jumna, cut off a convoy that carried provisions from a place called Ghosgurh, a retreat of Gholam Kadir's, and killed a number of the Rohilla escort.

"Those inside the palace now began to feel the pinch and Gholam Kadir's troops even began to grumble about their share of the plunder which their chief was keeping so coyly in the background. Somehow or other Gholam Kadir managed to keep them quiet.

"Then, early in September, he found that the Mahrattas not only had the temerity to increase in numbers but also in the boldness of their excursions. Realising deep within him that he was facing defeat and retribution, he moved his army out of the Fort and back to an old position across the river, sending part of his plunder to Ghosgurh. He fled from the Red Fort by a back way and sailed down the Jumna, leaving behind him an exploded magazine and Shah Alum with some of his women.

"What gives me infinite pleasure to relate was the fate of Gholam Kadir himself. The triumph of a tough brutal nature over a weak kindly one was but brief.

"Stealing away shortly afterwards from his encircled and decimated army, with his saddle flaps full of the more portable jewellery he had kept with him, he at last met his Nemesis. His horse fell and he crashed into the field he was riding across, becoming unconscious. He was picked up early next morning by a cultivator who recognised him and realised he had a past grievance against him, and so handed him over to his enemies.

"He was hanged in March 1789 after torture, insult and mutilation."

As Rushton's voice died away May gave a long sigh and let go my hand.

"How terribly interesting!" she said. "Your memory is wonderful, Ralph! I'm sure you must have been Gholam Kadir himself in a previous life!"

"Why, my pet—do you really believe in re-incarnation of souls?" laughed Rushton, his bulbous eyes flashing.

"Do I! I'm absolutely positive I was poor old Shah Alum!"

## CHAPTER XX

We had lunch in the trim green grounds of the Qutb Minar, that incredibly well preserved, 280 foot minaret built by Qutb-ud-din-Aibak, founder of the Slave Dynasty in India. Between lunch and tea we visited Tughlakabad, coming back for tea to the beautifully laid out Haus Khaz. Then on our way home we dropped in at the Purana Qila or Old Fort, going slightly out of our way from here to see the great Humayun's tomb. Rushton kept us plied with a running commentary of historical information that was amazingly interesting and grippingly spoken.

Back in Old Delhi we found time to drive up to the Flagstaff on the Ridge. From here we looked out over the wild scrub and rocks to where old Delhi stretched, from the Old Secretariat buildings comparatively close to us to the twelve spans of the Jumna Bridge, crossing a river that was practically dry, its sands covered with green scrub. To the right of the bridge rose the walls and gates of the Red Fort, while further still to the right were the imposing domes and minarets of the Jumma Masjid. Beyond the spire of the red stone Mutiny Memorial and the roof of Hindu Rao's house we could see the Memorial Arch in New Delhi. Behind us stretched the green lawns and neatly laid out red gravel pathways of Viceregal Lodge. There was something about it all that got inside one, reminding one of the romance and pomp and glory of past dynasties contrasting with the rather prosaic neatness of the present.

That night May was more affectionate than usual and between intoxicating kisses and long moments of bliss in the kindly darkness I thanked God that I had such a wife and that I had so abruptly and effectively rooted out the foolish jealousy that can and does ruin so many homes.

Next afternoon I left office early after the lunch interval, a suddenly racking headache making it impossible for me to work. When I got home I realised that May would probably be asleep, indulging in her usual afternoon nap, and walked

in with considerate silence through the drawing room. Our bedroom door was locked, obviously to keep out the sound of the servants as they laid the tea things in the dining room at four o'clock. I quietly slipped my key, (which I had recently lost and only found that day in May's trinket box, unknown to her—as I am always finding odd studs and collar pins,) into the keyhole and opened the door quietly, determined to wake May early with an unexpected kiss.

I thought I would never forget the sight that confronted me. It surpassed, for unreality, any nightmare I had ever had. When Rushton and my wife had donned their clothes I found that I still could not speak. I could hardly think. Why, only last night we had lain and talked and loved and thought of our unequalled happiness. There was something fantastic about this. I felt I would wake up at any moment.

May was calm and cool after the first acute brief moment of shock. Her dark eyes were unreadable as ever, her voice level.

"I suppose you'll want a divorce," she said. "I don't blame you. I'm sorry. We miserable human beings can't help ourselves, can we? We're born some way and we live that way. There are millions of husbands who never know. Millions of wives. And they live together happily in that ignorance for years. Some of them—those that live that long—celebrate golden weddings. Life is funny, Mark dear. You'll find that out as you go along. You'll hate me forever but you'll never try to put yourself in my place or even imagine how you would behave if you were to really fall in love with a married woman, madly and wholly in love."

"Tchah!" I snarled. "From all I've heard you have a habit of falling in love wholly and madly pretty often. I'm sure now you even took my duplicate key to the room and put it in your trinket box."

Her gaze was level, unashamed.

"I have fallen in love many times, as you say. I was born like that, as I've hinted. I tried not to like you too much or to marry you. I've never married before. It had never seemed fair to the man to do so. Yes—and I did take your key. But I don't know why I put it in my trinket box. I might have remembered that you sometimes look there for your mislaid studs. Perhaps if I had put it somewhere else you and I would have been happy for years and years."

Rushton had gone outside, livid and ill at ease. I did not know what to do. I knew I should strangle him or bash his brains out. But I felt coldly level headed and sane and indifferent of a sudden. Nothing really seemed to matter.

What May said was right. It was just a matter of circumstance after all, was it not, that governed our love life and adherence to the conventionalities. Man is gregarious and polygamous by the instinct. Maybe women are the same. I don't quite know. My headache had gone.

"I'm going back to office," I said dully. "When I come home I shall be happier if you've gone. I don't think we need trouble with divorces. I'll never want to marry again and you are not the marrying kind, as you say."

Her eyes were suddenly tender and somehow I knew that for once their expression did not lie.

"May I kiss you—just once more, Mark?" she asked. Her lips quivered as she waited those few seconds for my reply. It was brief. I spat into the fireplace as I walked from the room and from the house. There is no room in a brain that is baffled by love for understanding or magnanimity. Every one of our own faults is blotted out in the huge, swooping, blinding one that confronts us.

When I returned that evening I was a different man, ready to live, to its bitter end, a different life.

Much water has flowed under the bridge since then and I cannot say that I have always admired myself during the years. Without wanting to appear melodramatic I must say that the word woman became anathema to me. I let my bitterness eat into my soul instead of being sensible about it and writing it down to experience. I imagined myself as a super woman hater. I delighted in the sheer indulgence of my hatred. I pursued and conquered the loves and the bodies of many women and left them without so much as a thought of remorse. An ugly story, yes. Ugly and distasteful, and, deep down, wholly unsatisfying. I knew I deceived myself. I knew that my being ached for the kind of love I had known. The slopes and fragrance and magic of the Murree Hills loomed often in my memory. But I had dedicated myself to bitterness.

I could not bear the sight nor the thought of Delhi after May had left. Within a week of her departure I moved to Bombay and opened an office there. Within a fortnight I wondered why I had never taken this step before, for business was good, the town was alive. Delhi was romantic, historic. But it seemed to sleep, to drowse in the Past. And, too, in Bombay—even greater attraction for my bitter, ruthless soul—there was a greater proportion of that hated element—woman.

Then came the night when I met May at the Taj Mahal Hotel. She was alone. She looked as if she had grown

years older than the three we had been apart. Her face was a trifle lined. But her indomitable chin was as impressive as ever. Her eyes were still dark and inscrutable. She greeted me with a smile when I walked over to her table. I don't know why I went. Perhaps it was the fascination of the unknown. How would we both behave, for instance? Perhaps it was in answer to the law of love that no man and woman who have known the ecstasy of God's most baffling creation can ever forget each other or the comfortable everyday intimacies of married life—the taking of meals together, indulging in entertainment together, spring cleaning, a woman's fingers darning socks and a man's fingers erecting a chicken run or putting up a simple clothes line in the bathroom, the goodbye kiss before office every morning and at the lunch interval, a game of tennis together, the drowsy small talk before going to sleep.

Yes, small things. But they can parade themselves before one with amazing clarity and insistence even after a lapse of years. You can remember with a strange feeling of affection your wife cutting your finger nails for you, adjusting your tie, squabbling with the cook, smothering the bathroom with talcum powder and the smell of bath salts, leaving her night-gown without fail on the peg you insisted every day was yours alone.

Our meeting was singularly devoid of bitterness of any kind. I wondered how many years we would have lived happily together if I had not had that headache that nightmarish afternoon—just as she had surmised that if she had not put my key in her trinket box.....

"Hullo, Mark," she said. Her voice was as low and as caressing as it had always been. I sat down and offered her a drink.

"Alone?" I asked. I found it hard to look her in the eyes for some reason.

"Very much so."

"Rushton?"

She laughed softly, shortly.

"He married. Oh, we remained good friends. I don't know where he is though."

"Where are you living? Are you—I mean, there are no cash difficulties are there? Anything I can do?"

She reached across the table and took one of my hands before I could move it away. There was gratitude in her eyes. This was one of the times I felt sure they did not contradict their expression.

"The same old Mark—underneath!" she smiled. "A hard bitter crust—but the same heart I knew."

I looked away and pulled my hand from hers.

"No," she went on. "I'm all right. People like me can always look after themselves. I've looked after myself all my life—never had any parents at the age of twelve and no one else to look after me so—well, there you are! But is there anythin' I can do for *you*?"

There was subtle invitation in the level question.

"Would you like to go to a show?" I asked. "It would be like old times."

"I would!" Suddenly I thought there was almost childish eagerness in the slightly tired face.

We went to the Metro. And had her favourite ice cream at the milk bar during the interval.

"You haven't forgotten the particular kind I used to make a pig of myself with!" she smiled. I felt sheepish. "You should be hating me at this moment, Mark. But I know you're not."

"No, curse it, I'm not!" I said gruffly. "Why, I wonder? I hate all other women."

"No, you don't. It's a mood you lash yourself into. It's probably become a sort of mental habit with you. Mark dear, you've got to realise that no two human beings are built quite the same in brain and body and impulses. When you understand that you attain to that remarkable quality the world calls toleration of human failings. Everyone's not clean and straight and honourable. Most of that kind anyway haven't had all the temptations or trials that prove such qualities. Don't you see? We're all very frail at heart, Mark, given the right circumstances."

"I suppose you're right," I muttered. The bell rang for the resumption of the picture.

After the show we stood for a moment at the door of my Austin. There was a moon out. It emphasised the dark pools that were May's eyes.

"The same dear old car!" she murmured. "Would you like to see me home, Mark?" I nodded dumbly and we got into the car.

She lived in a neat, dainty flat overlooking Breach Candy Swimming Baths. I saw several familiar touches about the place. Several small ornaments I knew well. I felt strangely miserable as I took the chair she indicated. She signed to a smart looking bearer for drinks.

"You've a nice flat," I said.

"A nice man pays for it," she replied without a trace of self-consciousness. I felt no disgust at her tone or words.

"May," I said and I think I meant it, "why don't we get together again? I guess we could be happy."

"Don't be ridiculous. You could never be happy with me. I'm not your sort, Mark. I belong to the legion of the damned. The restless fiery souls that are always seeking something that is just out of their reach."

We finished our drinks. At last I stood up to go. She had a look of almost pathetic appeal on her face as she came over to me.

"Mark dear, are you sure there's nothing you want? You're still my husband, you know. And I still love you—very much. But I can't expect you to believe that. People find my sort impossible to understand I'm afraid."

As I looked into those soft eyes and saw the slight downward twist of her red lips I thought I did understand. Memory flooded me with a sudden sense of warmth and longing. The bitterness left me for a moment.

"Oh May," I muttered against the hair that clouded round her delicately shaped ears, "what a perfectly bloody world this is!"

"It is, isn't it?" Her eyes were appealing. "Won't you love me, Mark—just a little, wherever you go?"

"I'll never stop loving you, damn it!" I muttered. "I never have stopped yet I guess. I've hated a memory—a picture in my soul. Why don't you come back to me? We might make it."

She shook her head gently. The doorbell rang.

"Do you want to stay?" she whispered. "I can send him away. It must be David."

"Send him away. And you will come back to me, May. I don't care about that pop-eyed guy Rushton. That's all explained. Dead. But you'll have to promise me you'll stick by me henceforth."

"You fool, Mark, oh you dear fool! How can I promise you that? But I'll come back to you—for tonight. Let's go out to Juhu. Let's not sleep at all. Let's pretend we are living a lifetime together! Now go inside the bedroom and I'll get rid of David."

She was back after a few minutes, the sound of a pleasant young voice having filled the sitting room for a while, and

then faded as the door closed behind it. I took May in my arms.

Later we were speeding out to Juhu. The war had not started then. September the 3rd was a month away. And on a moonlit night Juhu was crowded. The crowds faded away by midnight. The Austin was the only car on the beach front. We talked all night. There seemed so much to talk about. Strange, wasn't it?

Dawn was breaking over the palm trees before we decided to return. The sound of the breakers seemed to hold a note of sadness. We drove back through the deserted streets of Bombay which was waking to a new day. Far ahead we saw a bent old sweeper woman clearing the road of some of the filth that had accumulated during the night. She must have been deaf. For as she walked into the middle of the road and I sounded my horn, she took no notice. Suddenly she saw us and wavered back and forward across the road. We were travelling fast. I swerved to avoid her tattered old form. The car crashed up the pavement and into a lamp post, overturning with a crash. In that unreal fraction of a second I remember hearing May's low cry—"Oh Mark!" and feeling her warm fingers close on mine before everything went black.

When I came to I was in St. George's Hospital. I had been unconscious for twenty-four hours. They told me they had buried May the previous evening. I learnt later, from lips unwilling to tell, that her head had struck the lamp post—but not before the splintered wind screen had removed both her eyes.

The shreds of human kindness that had remained in me, almost to be brought to warm ripeness again by the strange woman who had been my wife, deserted me completely now. I cursed the Almighty. I left the country. I drank my way round the islands of the Pacific. I still hated women. But I hated them because they were alive and the woman who had first made me hate them was dead.

I met Gerald Portland at Saigon and John Traill at Rangoon. Traill had been gathering atmosphere in the Pacific for his next novel and Portland, it appeared, was merely travelling prior to opening up in business in Bombay. There appeared to be some queer, undefined affinity between us. We shipped to India together and lived together in a flat on Malabar Hill in Bombay. It was a strange brotherhood, in spite of, or because of that indefinable affinity that existed

between us. For we soon learnt to hate each other. But the thought of living apart from each other did not occur to us. Our hatred seemed to exist just under the surface, just on the right side of a violent rupture. And we even swore a pact never to let each other down by underhanded means. I laugh when I think of it. Neither of us would reveal the true character of the others to anyone and neither of us would take advantage of the other two in order to endanger his livelihood, whatever it might be. Melodramatic, wasn't it? And quite unreal. But life itself is unreal when you get right down to bed-rock.

## CHAPTER XXI

CAME the night we saw Susan Mannering at her lone table in the Taj Mahal Hotel. I couldn't deny that she was lovely but she looked the "obvious" sort to me. Pale, under nourished, probably racked by disease. The country was flooding with evacuees and refugees from Malaya, Singapore and Burma. There was a system for looking after them which sometimes did not seem to work too well and sometimes did not work at all. Indian officials complained that Britishers and Anglo-Burmans and Anglo-Indians received preferential treatment. It may have been. I remember the words of an affected old Army Officer, retired, who had the task of arranging the reception of evacuees in a certain part of India and erecting camps for them.

"They're a dirty bloody lot," he had said disgustedly. "They refuse to lift a hand to work or pay for a thing. They expect everything done for them and everything paid for by Government. I'm sick to death of the smell of them and of pushing their backsides into trains. They don't seem to like Government's plan at all and most of them pretend they have no money. Government's idea is to let evacuees pay for themselves as long as they can and then receive financial help. Seems the only sane course to me. Of course I talk mainly of the Anglo-Burmans and Anglo-Malays." (He apparently did not realise that there were no Anglo-Malays as such. A Malay was a Malay.) "Most of the Europeans and Anglo-Indians are all right. Though you get a few swine amongst them too."

I remember thinking my informant looked remarkably like a well fed swine too but refrained from acquainting him with the fact. It is amazing how unthinking can be a comfortable brain. The burden is light upon the shoulders of another! I had often wondered what it would be like to suddenly lose all my possessions. Would I not "pretend" I had no money? Would I not be tempted to hang on like grim death to whatever small sum I had?

But I hint at feelings which only entered into me after some time—when I got to know Susan Mannering better in fact. In the beginning I regarded her and the world in general with cynicism and a certain grim amusement. I remember how poor Traill, with his pathetic crippled body and ghastly face stood up to me when I hinted that she was no more than a prostitute in distress. Somehow, when I think of my own words and attitude, in spite of what has happened since, I feel a little sick. It is queer how we self-styled synics adopt a pose so utterly ineffectual, so un-contributive towards progress and yet think we are so tremendously important. First I had hated women because of what my wife had done to me. Next I hated them because she had died. Could anything have been more irrational and futile?

I did not have much chance of knowing Susan Mannering better till she had returned with Portland from Fyzabad. Portland had not said where he was going to when he had packed one day and driven off to Victoria Terminus Station. Traill, who had disappeared some days previous, had said he was going to Delhi to see his publishers.

It was somewhat amusing to hear from Portland that Traill and Susan had been posing in Fyzabad as husband and wife. And it gave me the little extra excuse I needed for my conscience before I set about trying to impress her with *my* personality. Traill and Portland seemed to have been having things their own way.

I must admit I set out in pursuit of Susan coldbloodedly and with only a thin suspicion in my mind that she was not what I thought she was. I knew I was up against competition in Portland but felt confident of creating a more favourable impression than he with his dog teeth and perspiring body.

But after she began working for me, the taste for victory and conquest after the fashion I had conceived it turned to sawdust in my mouth. She was innocent and utterly charming. Unaffected and pathetically trusting. Lovely as a flower, with the loveliness that makes a man feel clumsy and afraid that he may inadvertently crush a petal.

Portland accused me one day of falling in love with her. I denied it but I knew he was right. All the stupidity and bitterness that had rotted my being for years stood out before me like an enormous pile of offensive rubbish.

I did not tell her I loved her, for there was young Peter Chambers in the Air Force who claimed her special attention. Apparently she had met him in Malaya, had loved him, and had never really been happy with her husband

Mannering, to whom she had been married a year when the Japs swept through the Peninsula.

Then came the telegram conveying the news of the boy's death. I did not gloat over it. But I was glad that I could now follow the dictates of my heart without confusion. Susan seemed to like me. Perhaps it would not be so difficult to turn that liking into something deeper, as poor Traill would have put it in his literary way.

She loved her work and it used to do me good seeing her in the studio amongst the few Indian boys I employed as artists. I worked myself in the studio sometimes, on urgent jobs, and on such occasions would have my drawing desk placed near hers, so that my heart improved but my work suffered.

And then came a sudden mysterious falling off of business and the loss of valuable—I might say vital Government contracts and appropriations. Within a fortnight I was practically ruined. I put it down to the war, tried to borrow money from Portland, who seems to make a fortune out of his string of restaurants, and who had on his own admission only a few days previously made a million out of Horner's Steels.

Only a few minutes talk that day revealed what had actually happened—Portland's desperate but foolish plan to smash me so that he could offer Susan some filthy job in one of his restaurants—about which there had always been genteel whispers in Bombay, whispers which never really came to anything because Portland ran his places so obviously well and in so perfectly upright a manner. The whole plan for my destruction had been so lavish, so long in operation that I could picture Portland sweating over it at night's forgetting, with his stupid animality, that his plan would be obvious to me and I could warn Susan, inform her of what he had done to Advertising Advice and why.

It was pathetic to see him crumple up and then, cunning in his beady eyes, play for time. I could see him hoping that at some time in the near future he would have another chance. What chance he really thought he ever had I do not know, for his usually sweating body and sheer unattractiveness were enough to cut him out of any dainty woman's calculations completely.

However, what plans he had after this affair I cannot say. He seemed anxious to make up for the breach of our pact, even to the extent of issuing a sudden invitation to Susan, Mrs. York and me to spend a week for Easter at his really charming place in Lonavla—Blue Dell. Mrs. York had come down to Bombay for a holiday with Susan.

The week in Lonavla promised to be a grand holiday, a fitting celebration as it were, to Susan's promise to marry me after six months if young Peter Chambers had indeed been killed in action. She thought that military reports about casualties in war were very often mistaken.

Perhaps it is difficult for you to realise, dear reader, what the promise meant to me. It is probably impossible for you to visualise so complete a change in my nature. I have no explanation for it but Susan's disarming sweetness, naivete and indescribable attractiveness. She made me feel satiated with cynicism and disgusted with my empty futility. She made me realise how really useless to the world and the scheme of things I was in the cloak in which I had met her.

It was good to get into the fresh air of the Western Ghats after the mugginess of Bombay. Portland drove his big blue Buick like a master—he always does. It is one of the few things—apart from his amazing efficiency at running his restaurant—that one finds to admire in him.

At Blue Dell Susan was in raptures, as was the forthright, intriguing and quite original Mrs. York. Portland even promised us a further attraction during the course of the week—the acting of a small play he had written for us in order that he might film it and bring us pleasant memories when we were back in Bombay after the holiday. I was frankly surprised, for I had never known he had it in him to construct anything but a really good menu. The play itself was amusing in a melodramatic, substanceless sort of way and we were to act it, Portland said, without serious regard for our reputations as actors.

When we went out to search for the best location for the play it was eventually decided, based on the almost technically expert knowledge Portland seemed to have acquired of these things, to put over our acting on the plateau of a long, hump-backed hill not far from Blue Dell. The plateau merged into an appreciably dense forest which, Portland told us, was seldom frequented by man, even the half naked villagers of that part of the world. Mrs. York's part was to disappear into the forest for a kind of carousal on gin. When she emerged screaming, I cannot describe how I felt, for one.

And when Portland and I looked down on what were obviously poor Traill's remains, with his mother's golden charm we were so familiar with lying amidst the bones of his chest, everything appeared to be quite unreal for a few minutes. "Good luck to every Traill" was engraved on the charm. Traill had never had much throughout his life. And there he was at last, a pathetic and gruesome skeleton.

Mrs. York had prevented Susan from coming anywhere near the place where Traill had hanged himself. And when we got back to them, it was obvious that she hadn't described what she had seen. I appreciated her forethought and marvelled at the fact that she had been able to so quickly control herself as to think of saving Susan the horror of discovery.

There was a strange expression on Portland's face as he looked across the plateau to one of the other hills. I could not quite understand that look. It was not respect for the remains which we had found—I felt sure of that. Nor regret for Traill's passing. It had a trace of bitterness about it, made even more baffling by a slight sneer. His words and tone, however, belied his look when he spoke. Mrs. York glared at him furiously for his lack of delicacy.

"Poor devil hanged himself!" he said in his peculiar snuffling way. "And yet his note said he was expecting us."

"Who—what note?" asked Susan. Mrs. York stared too.

"Traill," he blurted out before I could stop him. "John Traill. He must have come up here weeks ago to kill himself. That's his skeleton back there in the forest."

Mrs. York was just in time to catch Susan as she fell in a dead faint. I felt like kicking Portland for being such an unmitigated ass. I helped the big woman lay Susan down on the grass.

"Why in God's name couldn't you keep quiet?" I snarled at Portland. "You *are* a bloody ass—or swine, I don't quite know which."

Mrs. York was frantically opening Susan's blouse and chafing her hands. She kept up a running commentary, now biting, now tender, directed partly at Portland and partly at the unconscious Susan.

"You don't know what you've done, you fool! Why on earth some men are so brainless I can't for the life of me imagine. Susan darling, Susan my child, open your eyes. Come on—there's a dear—open them up! It's all right now. My God—to give a girl a shock like that—and a friend! Why do you think I kept quiet about what I saw, Mr. Portland? Couldn't you use your commonsense?"

Portland was somewhat taken aback at her forthrightness, I think, and the vehemence of her scolding. But I must say he took it well.

"I'm terribly sorry," he muttered. "It upset me a bit, knowing old Traill so well, you see. I couldn't think for a moment."

Just then Susan opened her eyes and sat up. Mrs. York and I helped her to her feet. Her face was white and her

red lips quivered. And now that the strain had broken I saw that Mrs. York's eyes too were full of tears. Apparently, and according to what Portland had once told me on his return from Fyzabad, both Susan and Mrs. York thought a lot of Traill. I remember the scorn with which I had denied the possibility that Portland had suggested—namely, that Susan had even loved Traill. She may not have loved him, but the poor crippled creature, with his unceasing romantic search for beauty in an ugly life and his sudden swift passions and almost feminine fears of certain things, had obviously occupied a high place in her esteem. I regretted the purely selfish motives which had prevented me from informing Susan that Traill had a bungalow in Lonavla. Obviously Portland had been as secretive. I think we had both been a little jealous and afraid of Traill.

"Poor John," murmured Susan as we all walked across the plateau to the steep winding path that would take us down the hill. Portland and I had agreed that we would arrange for the proper burial of Traill's remains in consecrated ground, in the beautiful little cemetery that nestled in the shade of the woods near the town's quiet, comparatively small hotels.

Mrs. York, large arm round Susan's slight waist, stoutly assisting her down the rough pathway, murmured as we paused for breath :

"Yes, poor lad, there was something about those lovely eyes of his in that pitiful, pitiful face that told you of the goodness that had always been in him, a goodness partly twisted out of him by his infirmity, resulting in a bitterness of speech and expression that was sometimes heartbreaking."

Susan shut her eyes as her friend spoke and her lips quivered again. Mrs. York called to mind a further memory.

"That last note he sent you, Susan dear. I felt then that all was not right with him. Do you remember the words? They sounded queer somehow. As if he had not been quite himself."

Susan shut her eyes again as she repeated the words referred to :

*"May I but dream. The sky is all forlorn,  
And there's the plain of battle writhing red :  
God pity them, the women folk who mourn !  
How happy are the dead!"*

"It's from Robert W. Service, whose work I think he admired," she explained softly. "He loved me, but it was obvious why he never asked me to marry him. He was afraid

I'd hate him for his presumption and, even if I did love him in return, that I would learn to regard the thought and sight of him with growing horror. 'You'll never see me again' he wrote. Oh I can't bear the thought of it!"

She buried her face in her hands again and Mrs. York patted her shoulder.

"Come dear," she said gruffly. "Let's be going. We're not doing any good staying here and living in the past."

We continued down the hill and thence along the dam wall that bounded the Tata Lake, back to the scented garden and twittering birds of Blue Dell.

## CHAPTER XXII

NEXT day, after we had buried Traill, we found amongst the dusty letters and documents on the centre table in his drawing room a reply from his lawyer in Bombay to a certain letter. It was dated a month previously.

" Dear Mr. Traill,

Your letter and instructions together with the copy of your Will duly signed and attested have been received safely. I note the address of Mrs. Mannerling and, should anything happen to you, will at once get in touch with her and inform her of her good fortune. I note that you emphasise that if you do not write to me after a month from today—or rather the date of your letter—I am to put the new Will into effect at once. Wishing you a long and prosperous life, I am, yours faithfully, D. H. Khan."

Portland taxed Traill's old servant about some reply he had given him when he had inquired into his, Traill's, whereabouts. The old man had apparently told him Traill had gone for a walk into the hills a day or so previously.

" Didn't you know he had gone *weeks* ago ? " almost screamed Portland at the poor decrepit old creature with his almost totally blind eyes. He shrugged his tattered old shoulders, his toothless gums working.

" I thinking he only go yesterday sahib," he replied querulously. " How I can remember ? I am old, the sun it does not warm me, strange lights they come before my eyes. I do not know, sahib, when he go or when you see me."

I thought Portland was going to strike the old man.

" Hey, hey," I intervened, " don't be so daft, Portland. What the hell's the matter with you anyway ? "

His pig's eyes were red and his ugly dog's teeth were almost gnashing. He seemed to control himself with an effort, wiping a clammy looking hand across his eyes. His voice was a murmur.

"It's just that it was so bloody awful seeing poor old Traill's bones there like that after this old swine had told me—or damn and blast it, let's forget it all, or else I'll go crazy. I suppose he's left Susan everything he had. God knows that wasn't much!"

"Wasn't it?" I asked quietly, looking round the dusty old room and realising how this old house could indeed be made into a bright nook worthy of its name. "Besides this delightful old house, with its tangled garden that could soon be licked into shape, Traill has left Susan something else."

His glance was quick and curious. There had been something about him since we had found Traill's remains that I found completely baffling and this look of his suddenly brought that strangeness home to me even more sharply. While he talked and appeared to be taking an intelligent interest in what one said he yet seemed to be planning something, thinking of something totally different behind his small deep set eyes.

"He's left her the spirit of his affection," I said.

"And something else," he burst out suddenly, almost viciously. I stared. He walked out of the room and out of the house down the unkempt drive. I followed him rapidly, catching him up.

"What the devil's the matter with you Portland?" I asked irritably. "You've been behaving bloody queerly ever since we found Traill up there."

He stalked along in silence for a few paces, then stopped and faced me.

"He left her with a child," he snapped, with apparent satisfaction. I thought his glance was a trifle furtive.

"Don't be a fool!" I cut back. "You've gone quite crazy, Portland! Something's got into you all right. Still trying to get rid of yours truly, are you? The amazing firm of John Dutton failed to ruin my business so its inventor is now trying to ruin the name of the girl who has promised to marry me! It's a clumsy way of doing it!"

His voice was very urgent.

"I'm not trying to poison you against her at all, Sheridan. It's just that what I told you when I got back from Fyzabad was true. She loved Traill. And I happen to have seen things which you would never believe. Perhaps when you realise she is going to have a child you'll believe me. Why do you think Mrs. York came here? On Susan's invitation of course. But why do you think she was so annoyed with me and so upset for Susan when I blurted out that it was Traill's skeleton that lay near the tree? Why do you think

Madame Zhukov had the mortification of discovering that the smell of a perfectly good lunch had made Susan deadly sick at the Blue Heaven? Women do get like that in the early stages of child bearing, Sheridan! You'll find her sneaking off soon to spend a few months' holiday with Mrs. York."

All the hate I had ever felt for him suddenly flared up in me at the sight of the venomous fat mask of his face, the relish with which he appeared to spit out each word. I hit him with all my force, knocking him down. I remember the crazy blood lust that filled me as I saw the blood flow oozingly down from his nose to his ugly wolf-like teeth. He wiped the back of a muddy hand across his face, the blood smearing across his cheek like a fresh cut wound. I leapt at him and grabbed him by the throat, dragging him to his feet and crashing my fist again and again into his bloated, rapidly pulverised face. When I had finished he sat moaning in the roadway, his suit covered with mud and blood, his heavy lidded green eyes peering forth malevolently from out of the swollen bruises that surrounded them. I stood looking down at him, sudden remorse cutting into me for taking advantage of his obesity, but hate of him still in my heart. He got up slowly at last. The lane had been deserted. No one had seen what had occurred. He dusted his suit with the precision born of impotent anger.

"You'll pay for this, Sheridan," he muttered at length, facing me and quivering in every limb, his cracked and bleeding lips mumbling thickly. "I promise you, you'll pay."

A sudden feeling of ineffectualness swept over me. I wondered almost frantically how he would explain away his battered face when we got inside the house again. I pictured some nerve shattering scene amongst the four of us.

"Portland," I stammered, going up to him with outstretched hand. "Portland, I'm sorry." I hardly knew what I was saying. I lied, I knew, in very desperation. He sneered at me through his bruises. The effect was bizarre.

"It's a nice time to be sorry, isn't it?" he demanded. "You should have got a hammer and knocked me over the head while you were about it. I might have been able to accept your apology then—in the other world."

"But Portland," I don't know why I spoke thus but a sudden sense of caution and new cunning seemed to have got in me, "you don't understand. I lost my head. I had reason to. A woman—my wife—once let me down. Poor child, she couldn't help herself—I saw that later. But it cut me up. It took the trust out of me. Somehow Susan brought it back. And the thought....."

I felt ashamed of my capitulation even as he suddenly thrust forth a hand, his eyes on the ground, his bruised lips formulating phrases that sounded genuine enough.

"I understand, Sheridan. I guess I'm the bloody fool. But, strange as it may seem to you, Traill and you do occupy soft spots in my fat, unprepossessing heart! I don't like to see you imposed on. Just as I hated to see poor Trail make a fool of himself with her, I don't know what she ever meant to do with him. For I'm certain she wouldn't have married him. The last time I saw them they were down by the river in Fyzabad, walking along its bank as dusk set in. Suddenly they were in each others arms. And then, as suddenly Traill walked away from her and that was the last any of us saw of him alive. I tell you she's got some queer power over a man—some ugly power. Look at the way she seems to jump from one to another in her affections—from her husband to Peter Chambers in Malaya, before her husband's body was even cold, apparently. From Peter Chambers to Traill. Then back again. Then from them to you. Next, I doubt not, if it suited her, the victim would be me. A right red road to glory for any woman with a harlot's heart!"

God knows he convinced me in spite of myself. He and the hidden remnants of a man called Mark Sheridan who had once discovered that love can have its deep buried fascinatingly ugly side. I cannot explain my sudden reversal of feeling towards Susan on this man's evidence. I found myself asking myself bitter questions. Had Traill indeed possessed her? Had she, by some queer feminine power known only to her and to women of Cleopatra's strange type, driven Traill to his death after sadistically draining him of his love?

If what Portland said were true I felt it was impossible to marry her. No man could continue to have respect for a woman in marriage if he knew she had borne the natural child of a friend—no matter how much he might think he could stand up to the strain, strengthened by his affection. It is wonderful how man's spirit can cavil at such things, how it feels hurt and hard done by! And yet he may sow his wild oats and indulge in the wildest of living and live at peace with his conscience, calling a woman a prude if she let his past affect her judgment of him and her love—and stipulating at the same time her virginity! Even as my thoughts ran on I knew myself for the miserable creature that I was.

"Well," I muttered as Portland and I continued our way back to Blue Dell, "there's only one thing to do and that is to wait and see."

He wiped his face tenderly with his handkerchief.

"Quite, I have no doubt you'll be convinced. I guarantee she will tell you nothing, that her next step will be to spend a long holiday with Mrs. York, with whom she will leave this child. Then, marriage with you and later, perhaps, if it suits her, confession—perhaps years afterwards, while the childless Mrs. York looks after her offspring."

"What about your face?" I muttered as we entered the iron gates of Blue Dell. He waved a suddenly airy hand.

"Oh never mind that. They'll never suspect a thing. I'll bathe it in cold water and dab a spot of Listerine over it. I'll tell them I slipped and fell flat on my face down a small drop in the hillside. You will have to back me up."

It struck me forcibly that night as I got into bed that much of Portland's suppositions could be proved false—mainly his supposition about Susan transferring her affections from one to the other—by the very fact that I, for one, had pressed my proposal on her, without an atom of encouragement on her part. Perhaps the same thing had occurred with Traill and Chambers. Perhaps her husband had been totally unsuited to her. One could hardly picture her being happy, for a start, in the jungles of Malaya, dependent on Club life and an occasional trip to one of the bigger towns like Kuala Lumpur or Penang.

I wrestled with things far into the night, surprised and not a little sickened at my readiness to believe Portland, whom I had always disliked intensely and my readiness to distrust Susan, whom I had begun to love after knowing her for a week. But it was hard to forget a certain Mr. Rushton. It was hard to forget poor Traill, with his twisted leg and his awful face. It was hard to imagine him and Susan making love. It was impossible to imagine it. Portland must be lying.

The obvious solution came to me. She had met Peter Chambers at Fyzabad. What more natural that it was *they* who forgot themselves in the crazy sweetness of a love re-united? In that case how could any man such as I, who professed to love her, condemn her? But where, I asked my lower self, where was the difference? Traill or Chambers, the effect was the same where I was concerned. I could not reconcile myself to marriage with a girl who had abandoned herself to either.

The futility of such an argument doused me like cold water. I was not prepared to accept those conditions of marriage and yet I would have been content to marry her had I known she had been compelled to surrender herself to her husband—whom she obviously did not love at all! And

all this without the slightest consideration for my own unsavoury past which had disillusioned me as its flimsy excuse.

Dawn was beginning to break when I eventually dropped off to sleep. I was late for breakfast.

"Lazybones," teased Susan as I sat down to my poached egg. Abdul Kareem the cook gazed at me in mild rebuke from the vantage point he usually adopted on the verandah in order to see how his cooking was appreciated or reviled. I was always the first up, the first to sample his breakfast. It was unthinkable to him, I suppose, that I should neglect his art like this.

Susan seemed to have reconciled herself to Traill's passing. She was much more cheerful this morning. I found myself attributing to her qualities of callousness and self interest which I knew did not exist. Man seeks many opportunities and by devious routes to gain his own ends, whatever they may be.

"Had rather a bad night," I explained, my eyes on my plate. I could hardly bring myself to look at her. With poor May somehow things had been different. One crashing, ugly climax and I had been clear in my mind, but here I could imagine things. Here I gazed on a beautiful woman cloathed in attractive navy blue and white.

Her voice was anxious.

"Why, Mark? Worrying about John?"

I must have forced myself to feel amazed at the nonchalance with which she used his name after the force with which the impact of his death had struck her. I nodded jerkily.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. By the way, Gerald and I were going through his things yesterday. I think you'll find he has left you everything he had."

Her eyes filled with tears. I gritted my teeth through a slice of buttered toast. How flagrantly she exhibited her affection for the man!

"Poor John, he was so sweet under that bitter exterior of his. Few people would have ever understood him, I think."

"Yes, but you understood him perfectly!" I wanted to shout at her. Instead I said "He had a grand old place here—Bright Nook. About half a mile away. You'll love it."

She looked puzzled.

"Bright Nook? Oh, I thought there was something queer just now when you said you and Gerald had been going through his things. I had no idea he had a place here." Her

eyes searched my face. "How strange that neither you nor Gerald ever mentioned the fact."

My voice was a mumble in reply.

"I guess we must have been afraid of losing you to him. You see, we understood you had a soft spot for him. Men can be very selfish, Susan, where their own ends are concerned—especially when they think so much of a woman like you."

There was a tiny smile round her red lips.

"So that's why I was kept in the dark. You mean to say you were afraid to take a level chance with your poor crippled friend. Is that it?"

No reproach filled her tone. But the fact that she should be cross questioning me and not me *her* enraged me suddenly. I jumped to my feet, snapping, "Yes, damn it, yes! I know it was underhanded not to tell you. But everybody's underhanded when it suits them. I dare say even *you* are!"

"Mark—the servants! Please control yourself. I'm not scolding your dear. It's just that—oh I don't know—it seemed unusual, that's all. But you're right." She paused briefly and looked out of the door towards the crocus lilies in the garden. "Yes, all humans are underhanded when it suits them. We're all very, very frail at heart. Come Mark, let's walk round the garden."

We went out into the sunlight together. I seemed to have heard those words before—yes—from May's lips. "We are all very frail."

"Sorry I got touchy," I muttered self consciously. "I guess my nerves are on edge with this business of poor Traill's death and then so little sleep last night."

She squeezed my arm. Looking into her face I found it hard to believe that she was anything but a child of circumstances, Portland anything but a liar, and I anything but a swine for adopting my new-found cunning to discover whether Susan indeed meant to deceive me.

## CHAPTER XXIII

Duke's Nose is a jutting promontory of solid rock in Khandalla in the Western Ghats, not far below Lonavla. It takes its name from its likeness in shape to the masterful, forceful beak of the Iron Duke and is famous amongst dwellers in Western India.

If you look down on the plains from this vantage point you will see part of India's very soul.

The silver of glinting, gliding streams passes through the gold of crops and the emeralds of lush verdure. Cattle move there, far below you, but you do not hear the tinkle of the bells round their necks. The ploughs cut through the rich earth but you cannot see the sods turning. The winding Ghat road banks and twists its way from the steep hillsides to that placid plain below, intruding itself and its modern motor cars into an atmosphere built from the peace and the philosophy of ages.

Somewhere in a tree behind you may hear a koel calling. And looking into the blue distance you know that your city-bound soul is in reality part of the soul of the country before you, part of eternity itself.

I plucked a handful of wild daisies and inhaled their fragrance. That drowsy Easter afternoon and the smell of the grass and flowers and the glory of the scene below and beyond me brought back to me memories of Murree, with May at my side, in Spring. How vividly indeed can certain passages in one's life be brought to mind by the scent of grass, of flower, the smell of burning leaves or pine wood, the sight of a plodding herd of cattle homeward bound and disappearing into the glory of a golden setting sun, the friendly bark of a dog in the moonlight, welcoming you home, the ripples of a lake caressing the reeds at its edge with gently quivering touch.

I had left the others at Blue Dell after lunch, my body and mind craving exercise. To Susan's questioning look and "But you said you had a bad night, Mark! Hadn't you

better have a good rest this afternoon ? " I replied that I could not sleep in the afternoon anyway and that exercise would enable me to sleep soundly that night.

I had hoped that alone out here in God's fresh air I might find something worth while in my make-up, something that would reject for ever the poison Portland had injected into my mind.

But the very beauty of the memories of May only served to emphasise the subsequent horror we had passed through. I experienced a wave of tenderness when I remembered that last peaceful night at Juhu, when the stars themselves, and the sighing sea, had seemed to weep for a strange woman's imminent passing. It was hard trying to puzzle out the Almighty's plan—if He had one. It seemed here that the affection that I had felt for May when meeting her after years, in spite of the flagrant scene that had confronted me in Delhi, was a lesson to me—a lesson that said—"Do not be too sweeping or hasty in your judgments, no matter what the seeming evidence." And yet here was I almost eagerly awaiting the proof of Susan's guilt—her statement that she wanted to spend a long holiday with Mrs. York. If she did make that statement, I had told myself a dozen times, I would let her go without thinking I suspected a thing. I would put her mind at rest by saying that neither I nor Portland would be able to pay her a visit at Fyzabad—not that that would make any difference, for I felt sure she would not risk staying in Fyzabad. And then I would do my utmost to find her when she was not in a position to lie to me or keep me ignorant of her condition any longer.

And yet I longed for her to make a clean breast of this thing, whatever had happened. I could picture myself tenderly forgiving her and saying I loved her in spite of all. But would she believe me—since I had once hinted at the cause of my previous bitterness and meanness of soul? How grandiloquently and with what foolish self interest do our brains operate when there is no substance but a dream on which to base our noble actions!

But then, in the next flash of thought, I realised how impossible it would be for any girl but a fool to confess to such an enormity to the man who had asked her to marry him. She might look at it from the point of view of her own and her child's interests. Or she might, with the peculiar sense of sacrifice common to women view it from the angle that confession would bring unhappiness to the man.

I remember seeing her sitting in the garden when I got back, on a convenient rock of one of the rockeries round the base of a mango tree. There was something wistful about

her in that moment, something ephemeral even. The sun was setting and the sound of the bells of homeward bound cattle was on the soft evening breeze.

"You look tired, Mark," she greeted me, getting up from her perch and joining me on the drive, slipping her arm through mine.

"I am tired," I returned. "It's a good walk though, and the scenery is so utterly delightful it makes up a thousand-fold for any fatigue."

"I wish I'd come now," there was a slight pout on her red mouth. "I couldn't sleep at all—and poor Vera snores so. I've been wandering round the garden all afternoon with Yolanda. I was even considering going for a swim in the viaduct. Gerald told me it's grand for swimming."

"Don't you go getting into that viaduct!" I warned. "The current is so swift it would probably mark the end of Susan Mannerling!" We were speaking of the viaduct that conveys water from the Tata's lakes down to their power station.

"And the end of the future Susan Sheridan, Mark?" she sounded so natural, so charmingly childlike and innocent that I could not believe she carried Traill's child within her.

"Yes," I murmured, my new-found cunning over-riding the affection I felt for her. I must not, I reflected, let her suspect what I thought. I added, so as to watch her reaction, "Are you sure you'll be happy with me, Susan?"

She wrinkled her forehead and nose in a playful gesture of distaste.

"We-ll, I don't know! It all depends!"

"On what?"

"On whether you love me."

"Do you love me?" I could not prevent a trace of sharpness creeping into my tone. She sensed it at once.

"Why, Mark—whatever's the matter with you today? I think you must have had a terrible night last night. You'd better have an early dinner and go to bed."

She was half smiling and yet obviously taken aback. I drew her to my side, my hand and arm subconsciously trying to gauge whether her waist was as slim as before or whether the advancing weight of maternity had already distorted it. But there was nothing in the vibrant, vital touch of her that betrayed her secret—if secret she had.

As the week drew to its close I found myself drawn to her as strongly as before, Portland's words sinking into a niche far in the background of my mind.

Mrs. York appeared to have taken to me and seemed relieved that Susan had chosen me and not allowed herself to be "impressed by Mr. Portland. He's your friend, I know, but somehow I can't take to him. And my instinct is so seldom wrong."

Poor Mrs. York, how mistaken was her instinct where I was concerned! But we got on well together.

"Are you staying on with Susan for a bit when we return to Bombay?" I asked her the morning of the day we had fixed for our return. She nodded.

"Yes, indeed. Susan wants me to stay the full month. And I *think*, I'm not sure, that she's considering spending a while with me again in Fyzabad a little later."

All my fears and suspicions were back again in a flash. Her words bore out Portland's prophecy. But I told myself, I must not lose all sense of proportion till Susan told me with her own lips that she wanted to spend a long holiday with her big boned, forthright friend. I found myself wondering, as we all set about packing, just how Susan proposed to explain away the length of the holiday she would have to have if she was going to evade suspicion. It would have to be six months at least. And she had promised to marry me at the end of six months—if Peter Chambers did not turn up. It seemed to me that she must be in a quandary at heart.

The answer to my speculation came quite suddenly one day and in a manner I had least expected, what with my cunning and my attributing to her the qualities outlined by Portland. We had been back in Bombay a week. Susan had seemed particularly quiet all day at her work. I had been engaged on a special three-colour poster for one of our most important clients and could not but notice the sudden change in her.

When I was driving her home after we had closed for the day, she suddenly laid a hand on my knee.

"Mark dear," she said softly, "would you be very heart-broken if I didn't marry you?"

I did not answer for a long while. This was taking the wind out of my sails with a vengeance and snatching the weapon from my hand before I had a chance to use it. We were speeding past the Bombay Gymkhana Grounds and a rugby match was in progress. I watched a hefty individual take a penalty kick before I replied.

"Why are you asking me this Susan?" I'm afraid there was a cunningly plaintive note in my voice. "Are you tired of the thought of me already?"

The pressure of her hand increased on my knee.

"No. But Mark, I'm afraid I can't marry you."

"Why?"

I had some faint idea she might tell me about the child she was going to have. In the same fraction of a second I was once more amazed at myself for the unhesitating manner in which I seemed to have accepted Portland's accusations.

"I—I don't think I'll make you happy. Really I don't."

"Don't be an ass! Good lord, I'd be the happiest chap on earth if you married me—even if you didn't really love me." I could not prevent myself adding the last few words. Glancing at her I saw that her lovely face wore a strained look.

"But I don't really know whether I love you enough, Mark. And if Peter were to return later than after six months? What then? Our marriage would be a tragedy."

The very cunning she had employed infuriated me for a second. With true feminine brilliance she had chosen the avenue that was exactly right. Next, I knew it as surely as my foot was on the accelerator, she would say she must leave me for a long while so that she could find out the real depth and strength of her feeling for me. After all, absence was the acid test of love, was it not? I had no argument against that fact. But the circumstantial evidence was mounting up against her. I reflected smugly that there was really little I did not know about the feminine mind. I did not stop to think that her indecision was more than probably due to the fact that I insisted I would be happy if she married me. If she thought I would not take it hard she would probably tell me everything and get out of my life. I recalled my impassioned proposal to her a short while after Peter Chambers' mother had sent her the wire reporting her son's death. I wonder why some of us possess such miserably perverse minds?

"Peter won't return later than six months," I said glumly. "Unless, of course, he is a prisoner of war. And if that's the case, God only knows when the Japs will release him. I don't think they have any system of exchange of prisoners."

She was quick to seize the opening, I thought. I turned into the road leading past the block of flats that contained her own.

"Yes, Mark, he may be a prisoner of war, as you say. And if he came back, after a year or two, the lives of all three of us would be miserable."

"But good heavens, Susan," I said as I pulled up at the kerb, "we can't go living in the future like that. What if everyone in the world didn't do certain things in case something else cropped up! There'd just be no progress at all."

The clock in the Rajabai Tower, which was quite close, struck six o'clock. It seemed like a funeral knell somehow—a knell to the normality and decency I thought I had again won back and a knell to Susan's real affection.

"Will you tell me," I went on bitterly quoting Portland, "one thing. How came it that you seemed to fall in love with people in such rapid succession—your husband—you must have loved him to marry him in the first place—young Peter Chambers—even Traill—and then me. Surely no woman could feel real love for....."

"Mark, stop, please. This doesn't sound like you. I could answer your question to satisfy even your seemingly exacting mind. But I won't. I'll let you work it out. You've known me long enough to get the correct answer, I think."

For the first time since I had known her she spoke sharply. She opened the car door and got out, closing it again with a little bang and walking off across the road to the entrance of the flats.

I sat for a while with my face leaning on my arms across the steering wheel, my mind in a whirl. I cursed myself for a cad and a fool. I knew, without trying to work it out, the answer to my own question. The face of May loomed up in my mind's eye—May, who loved many men with equal fervour and abandon. She had been made to love. That had been her destiny. Susan was not quite the same, but the basis of the character was there—tenderness, the shrinking from hurting a man's feelings—pity, the mothering instinct. The bet, as I have said before, was an even one that each one of us four had thrust our love on her—not she hers on us.

Suddenly my mind was made up. I did not care whether Portland spoke the truth or a pack of lies. I loved this girl.

I got out of the car and followed Susan up to her flat. When Yolanda opened the door I thought she glared at me in an unfriendly way.

"Mistress Susan no want to see anyone," she said. "She very upset."

I walked into the drawing room. From the bedroom came the sound of Susan crying.

"Susan," I called softly at the door. "It's me—Mark. I'm terribly sorry dear. I haven't been myself somehow,

lately. I promise you I'll behave in future. I've been a beast. Come on out and let me see you smile, please."

Something told me I had been taking too much for granted. I realised that I deserved a kick in the pants, with no reservations. My mind was clear—clear of any poison Portland may have put into it. I did not care if Susan did have a child. I yearned to show her the extent of my love. Alas, how really fleeting can be those spasms of impulsive sacrifice within us men! But Susan's tearful voice was coming from the room.

"Leave me today, Mark—please. I know how you feel. I'll see you tomorrow. No hard feelings dear."

## CHAPTER XXIV

NEXT day Susan sent me in an official memorandum asking for six months leave from the 1st of the month. I sent for her and when she was seated near me in my comfortable office I smiled and flicked her memorandum with my fingers.

" You haven't worked here long enough to have six months leave, Susan ! "

I can honestly say that as I spoke I felt as full of good resolves as I had been at her flat the previous evening. She looked white and peaked and there were shadows under her eyes. She plucked at one of the tassels on her blouse, her eyes on her smart square toed shoes.

" If you can't let me have it, Mark, I'll have to resign," she said slowly.

" Aha ! " I laughed. " The obstructionist, eh ? The old satyagraha wallah ! But why all this sudden moroseness ? Why this talk of resigning ? You know you can have this job any time you want it. Besides, in about six months time you'll be Mrs. Sheridan anyway, and you won't have to work here unless you want to. So why shouldn't you have the leave. I'll give you full pay too, while you're away. Where are you going to stay ? With Mrs. York ? "

Gratitude was in her eyes as she looked up at me, a wistful smile on her lips.

" Yes, Vera's dying to have me. She says Fyzabad's hot but healthy and that the heat is not so enervating as that of Bombay. We might even spend a few weeks in Naini Tal, or even in Murree, where the York's have a small cottage."

" Lucky devils ! " I said enviously. " You'll love Murree. You must write to me, you know ! Keep me posted as to where you are, in Fyzabad or Naini Tal or Murree."

Another stab of shame shot through me as the thought crept into my mind, in spite of myself, that I *must* call on her sometime before she had her child. By now I was quite reconciled to the fact that Portland had spoken the truth.

Yet I wished to make sure. I could not bear the thought of perhaps never being certain. If she should be able to hide the child or to get some of Mrs. York's friends to adopt it then I would never know and I would never be happy. Always would there be that sense of injured suspicion at the back of my mind. I kept telling myself that even if I was with her when the child was born it would make no difference to our love—as long as I knew.

Susan got up and came over to me, slipping a soft arm round my neck and pressing my head to her side. All the sadness and depression of the previous day seemed to have left her. I was glad and yet, mingling queerly with that gladness was resentment—not so much against Susan as against Traill.

"Dear, dear Mark!" she whispered and, stooping, kissed me. I realised that we so seldom kissed, for some reason or the other. There was always a restrained note to our behaviour that had never seemed out of place—perhaps because of my past and the natural desires of inherent decency not to sully her with passion.

But now, with the scent of her hair and skin in my nostrils, and the pressure of her soft lips against mine, restraint seemed a fit thing to cast to the winds. I returned her kiss passionately, unable to remember when I had last felt this breathless elation. She broke away from me gently, a shy look in her dark eyes.

"I—I didn't know you could kiss like that Mark!" she said. "You're positively dangerous!"

I squeezed her hand and, honestly, in that moment, when my heart and soul went unreservedly out to her, I never dreamt I should ever let her down or let Portland's insidious poison seep into my soul again. To know that she was going to have Traill's child was one thing. But to treat her in my mind as a prostitute who transferred her affections unthinkingly and unfeelingly from one to another of a succession of men was another. And the latter had been the general tendency of my first reactions to Portland's words—a tendency buried deep at this moment under the weighty, all conquering surface of love.

I was prepared for Portland's sneers that evening when I told him Susan was spending a short holiday with Mrs. York. "I told you so!" oozed from every pore of his ghastly, clammy looking skin. His snuffing voice was maddening. I regretted my apologies to him on the occasion of beating him up and bitterly censured myself for ever lending a sympathetic ear to what he had said.

"A short holiday?" he asked, eyebrows going up and his mouth hanging open in a grossly inhuman expression of knowingness. "As the bishop said to the actress—how short is short?"

I tried to make my voice sound airy as I spoke.

"Well, six months. We've decided it will be the best way of finding whether we care for each other the real way or not."

He burst into a guffaw of his coarse, ugly laughter.

"Strike me every colour of the rainbow!" his fang-like dog teeth and the peculiarly level space between seemed to champ down viciously, in my imagination, over his lower lip. "You know, Sheridan, I always thought you were a fool, but I never realised you were *such* a fool!"

"But good God, you fat idiot," I snapped, "isn't it better to find out than to go ahead in doubt—especially in view of all your talk—lies, all of it, I don't doubt for a second."

His mirth became somewhat less expressive and less explosive. He looked for a moment like a human being instead of an animal.

"My friend," he said, "you have only to wait for time to show you whether I'm a liar. Of course, after that it but remains for you to judge. If you still feel the same way about her when she's suckling young Traill, well, that's up to you, isn't it? But I know how I'd feel and how I feel now. A flower is not so sweet once it has been plucked, is it?"

But a sudden discrepancy in his words and attitude struck me like a shaft of light. He looked comically irritated as I grinned at him.

"By God!" I said. "You are a liar! And you can tell them with a straight face, can't you?"

"What do you mean?" the exclamation had puzzlement in it.

"I'm thinking back to the day your wonderful John Dutton scheme crashed about your stupid ears. Why did it crash? Because you were pathetically eager for your name to remain pure and unsullied with Susan. And yet, according to what you said the other day at Lonavia, *you must have always known—from your stay in Fyzabad—that Traill and she—that they had—pshaw!*—I can't say it because it obviously only originated in the filthy depths of that morass you call a mind. And now you say you know how you feel—you have renounced all thought of Susan! I don't know why I've been so dense up to now. It's just what our dear

Gerald would have thought up. You've been trying the old Dutton trick—but in a different way, eh? Waiting to step in again with your vileness."

He was obviously taken aback for a moment. Then he threw his head back and gave himself up to a paroxysm of laughter. When he could speak again he wagged a fat finger at me after the fashion of a drunk.

"I could have invented everything Sheridan," he said, "but the child. You know, I feel sorry for you. While we're busy working things out—you seem to be particularly sharp—reflect for a moment that this child couldn't be her late husband's—not if she has it when it seems she will have it! That eliminates her husband. Then Peter Chambers, poor lad. It might be his child—but for two points of evidence. Firstly I overheard him whispering miserably to Susan one night when they made love in the grounds of the Happy Valley Club that they would never be able to have any children because of a certain flying accident he had had. Secondly, though I hate to remind you of it, I was an unhappy witness in the lives of Susan and Traill of a certain passage....."

"Shut your mouth you swine, or I'll murder you!" I snarled suddenly, starting up and moving towards him in one bound. He went livid, all the gloating, sneering confidence driven from him. His mouth hung open ridiculously, his eyes were wide, his hands outspread in the last gesture that had accompanied his proration. We must have remained in the individual positions of this grim tableau for fully ten seconds. Perhaps he did not know how near he had been to death nor I how near I had come to murder. I only recalled, in those few tense seconds, two other occasions in my life when I had felt similarly drawn to an act of fatal violence.

"Sit down Shediran," gasped Portland suddenly. "Sit down."

I don't know what the light in my eyes was like, nor how murderous my features were. Maybe even, the scar on my head served to complete his mortification.

"I can see it's no good talking to you old man," he went on appeasingly. "As I said once before, I find myself thinking of my friends—their happiness—yours and, when he was alive—Traill's."

"I'm not so sure of that sickly sentiment," I muttered as I sat down again. "And if you want to remain healthy, Portland, I should keep off the subject of Susan in future. You're talking to the wrong man."

A little of his former confidence seemed to return. He said in a semi defiant tone, "You can't go indulging in violence

here, Sheridan. After all, there is a law and a police force in India, you know."

"So there is everywhere," I returned, coolly now. "But men still murder their fellows—or maybe just cripple them sometimes. You know—break their arms and legs and that sort of thing. Fun and games, in fact."

Maybe I looked more sinister than I thought I did, for his face went livid again. I decided that I'd had about enough of him for the time being and went off into my room.

I saw Susan off on the first of the month with a feeling of lead weighing me down. Everything seemed to presage evil and disaster. I thought with a sudden shrinking of railway accidents and held her the closer as she leaned through the carriage window. Mrs. York was a trifle red eyed but nonetheless her old confident, strapping self. The guard's whistle blew and a wisp of green flag waved.

Next morning I threw myself into my work with a will, determined not to think of Susan's holiday or the reason for it. A particularly heavy rush of Government work assisted me in this admirably.

Throughout the weeks that followed Portland kept more or less discreetly out of my way except for inviting me once or twice to lunch at the Blue Heaven where the odious Madame Zhukov compelled my unwilling yet fascinated attention. She was like a large toad, I thought, and her heavy moustache gave her an even more gruesome appearance. Her shiny, doughy looking face and stumpy little hands reminded me of the flesh of a drowned corpse, bloated and altogether horrible. In fact she was not unlike a moving corpse—until one looked into her beady eyes. And then one found one's self thinking of a snake, very much alive.

"Mrs. Mannerling," she asked in a revoltingly cheerful manner one day. "How is she?" I thought Portland was rather quick with his reply, that there was a certain amount of satisfaction in his voice, in spite of the fact that he glanced a trifle nervously at me.

"She's gone on holiday. She has been very washed out for a long time in this heat."

Madame Zhukov nodded understandingly. Her voice was understanding. Even the bangles at her wrists seemed to rattle understandingly as she spread her hands.

"Of course," she said sweetly. "Poor girl. She is so beautiful, so lovely. But she will have the peaches in her cheeks, no, when she returns? The peaches and—oh!—so happy a mind!"

I knew, from the hidden note of suggestion under the sweetness, and from what Portland had mentioned about the lunch Susan had found so nauseous at the Blue Heaven, that Madame Zhukov had discussed Susan's condition with him. Her words seemed to defy me, to offer a challenge to my commonsense.

Somehow, that night and for many nights afterwards, I could see Madame Zhukov nodding and could hear her voice, so understanding, so full of feeling. I could sense she was laughing at me. "Cuckold!" her snake's eyes said. The thought of her began to grow on me. It forced me to think of Susan, to wonder what she was doing, how she was. I loved her, I would tell myself, therefore I must not let this foolish sense of gnawing jealousy and bitterness and suspicion overcome my desire to act like someone who was indeed in love in the true sense of the word and not for the sake of demonstration.

But each morning at office the calendars on the wall and the leering glass Mephistopheles paper weight on my desk shouted at me louder than the morning before: "You will never be happy till you have satisfied yourself as to what is happening. You will never be happy with her anyway. You may even say you forgive her. You may marry her. But the thought of this child will make you eventually hate her. You will always remember May. You will always be suspecting things. She will not be able to go out with a man but you will accuse her in your heart if not in words of duplicity."

I would brush the thoughts aside and strive to get on with my work. But soon the paperweight would say again, aided and abetted by the smiling girls' faces on the calendars: "Cut loose, you fool! Just don't have anything more to do with her. Tragedy waits for you round the corner if you persist in this folly. Call it off. It's very easy. Better than making both your lives miserable. Besides, can't you feel that terrible weight on your mind—that forerunner of evil, of something utterly tragic?"

"But her letters are so natural and sweet," I would tell the paperweight and the calendars and myself.

"Of course they are!" would come the retort. "What else do you expect? You don't think she'd give you the slightest inkling of affairs, do you?"

I took a week-end at Lonavla to try and recapture my former self, the self that had once gone up to the Murree Hills on a honey-moon.

From the roadside one day I watched an entire village of gypsies on the move and marvelled at their light-heartedness,

their simplicity, at the fact that they probably completely lacked intrigue. They led their ponies and short necked bulls and buffaloes which were packed with their worldly goods—tents and cooking utensils and spinning wheels. Youngsters perched precariously on top of these piles of tattered, well worn homely articles. Any dogs or fowls that seemed unable to accompany the chattering caravan on foot were allowed to ride with the children.

Where a child was too small to sit up by itself, it was tied to the particular animal's back by means of a wide piece of cloth wrapped round its middle and then round each end of the crude pack saddle, which was fashioned of old *razais* and branches of trees.

The number of dogs trotting along by the sides of their owners surprised me. Thin but intelligent looking, like most pariah dogs, a number of them seemed to have a predominant greyhound strain in them. They are excellent watch dogs, these, surprisingly attached to their somewhat hard hearted, childish owners. All the animals were branded, apparently with the mark of the particular family or group that owned them.

The shoes of the men and women were obviously soles cut from old motor car outer tyres, fastened to their feet by cord. The more advanced children marched by the side of their particular relatives and begged from passers by. I noticed that not one of the grown ups begged. They pursued their way with apparent innocence and ignorance of the requests of the children, fully conscious, no doubt, that they had trained them most carefully in the technique of soliciting alms.

Their simplicity and their childlike, inconsequential prattle as they passed made me realise what a great deal civilisation as we know it has to be ashamed of. I felt of a sudden that I had found my former self indeed. I looked out over the heads of the gypsies to the sun where it sank into the magic plains below and thanked God I had found sanity. And then, as I looked back at the straggling gypsies, I saw a young mother shuffling cheerfully along, a suckling child at her unashamed breast. I walked back up the winding road to the hotel with my mind once more in a tumult.

## CHAPTER XXV

BACK in Bombay the very surge of the sea aganist the sea wall of Marine Drive seemed to roar jeeringly at me each evening I drove home along it.

"Find out!" it boomed. "Find out! Why didn't she tell you? Why does she marry you? Find out!"

The months passed. Portland and Madame Zhukov appeared to watch me with added interest.

"You're losing weight, old chap," said Portland to me one morning as we left the flat. "And you've been pretty quiet of late. Nothing wrong I hope?"

How well can some people talk with their tongues in their cheeks! He was probably eating his soul out hoping that there was something wrong. And, anyway, with the low cunning possessed by most animals, and considering all that he had told me, he must have known what was wrong. After all, he had engineered me into this state of mind.

"Must be the heat," I muttered. "Bombay's not so good at this time of the year."

"Why not have a holiday?" he suggested. "I'm told the Punjab and United Provinces, and, in fact, the north of India in general, is delightful in October."

He might just as well have plainly said: "Go to Fyzabad and call on Susan."

That morning I called in Carthew, my assistant and told him I needed a month's leave. He was only too eager, as always, to handle the firm alone for a month.

"I'll be glad of this opportunity to show you what I can do, Mr. Sheridan," he would always say, his young face alight with pleasure and anticipation. I handed things over to him and went home to pack.

I decided I would not mention my departure to Portland. He would probably guess anyway where I was going. I could imagine him saying ingenuously if I did speak to him

about it : "By jove ! The Yorks *will* be glad to see you. Give them my regards. Oh yes—and—er—my very best to Susan."

As the train rushed northwards through the kaleidoscopic countryside I found time to muse on my folly. Surely I *was* making a fool of myself. After all, Susan would not still be writing from the Yorks' address if she had anything to hide. She would not be able to take the chance of myself or Portland calling on her.

I had never been to Fyzabad and the small station and the deserted roads made me wonder why any European stayed there at all. But the bungalows looked old and comfortable and cheerful, with their subdued lights gleaming from them in the moonlight.

It was half past nine as a dilapidated tonga carried me through the tree covered, widely spread out cantonment. I reckoned that I would just about find the Yorks and Susan at dinner, with Yolanda's dusky face in the background, her voice chivvying the servants to greater heights of efficiency.

At last my rattling vehicle pulled into the drive at the York residence. A chick was lifted on one of the doors leading out onto the verandah and a short figure appeared in the moonlight.

"Hullo," he called. "What can I do for you ? "

"This is the York's place, isn't it ? " I enquired, my heart thudding with dreadful expectancy and my breath in my throat. He nodded. I saw he had a small round face and wore a pair of glasses on the tip of his nose.

"Yes—I'm York." I thought there was a queer gleam in his eyes of a sudden, but perhaps the moonlight was deceiving me.

"Oh then, that's fine," I said. "Would you mind if I called in now and again ? I'm thinking of renting a bungalow if I can for a month's holiday. I'm a friend of Mrs. Manning's. She may have spoken to you about me."

He was silent for some moments. I felt uncomfortable. Then he asked slowly : "Is your name Sheridan ? "

I nodded and he grunted, turning on his heel.

"Come on in," he said tersely. "And by the way, there's no need to go looking for a bungalow. You must stay here. Any friend of Susan's is a friend of Vera's and mine."

"I'd appreciate that very much," I returned, my eyes and ears open for any sign of Susan. But the house was quiet and appeared to be deserted.

"Have your wife and Susan gone for a walk?" I asked.  
"I thought I'd find you all at dinner."

He was silent again for a few moments before replying.

"They're not here. It was only three days ago that I told them a change would do them good."

So. It seemed obvious that they were all in the plan to deceive me. I lost sight of any sane view once more. I deliberately thrust into the hindmost recesses of my mind the fact that it was I who had persisted in persuading Susan to marry me.

I tried to appear nonchalant as he showed me round a big airy room.

"This used to be poor John Traill's," he murmured, regret in his tone and bearing. "I believe you knew him too. Queer chap. Gold underneath. Like most human beings, I suppose. There's so much good in the worst of us, eh?"

"Indeed there is," I laughed nervously. My mind was furiously trying to cope with the new situation. I could not stay here. The whole object of my visit would be lost if I did.

"How long will they be away?" I asked.

"Oh maybe a month or two," was the thoughtful reply.  
"It's tough luck on you missing them like this."

I came to the most vital question.

"Where have they gone?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"God knows. I left it to them."

It was obviously no use trying to pump him. He was hand in glove with the others in this scheme. But I found something nagging at my brain, something that had for the moment eluded me—something that I knew should not have eluded me. Where had Susan said they might go while on holiday? Murree, yes—I could remember that. But there had been another station. Yes, of course—I had it. Naini Tal. One of two stations. I couldn't very well search both. This wizened little District Magistrate must tell me where they had gone.

"Surely," I almost sneered, "surely you must have heard from them? Surely you know their address?"

"They left only three days ago, I told you," he replied calmly, his steady eyes gleaming at me through his glasses.

"But good lord, this is disappointing. I had hoped so much to see Susan."

He patted me on the shoulder and led me into the dining room.

"I know, old chap. I fully understand. But I'll probably be getting a letter in a day or two and then you can get along to wherever it is they are stopping."

I knew that no letter would arrive, according to him anyway, and that I would only be allowed to get along when Susan was in normal health again and there was nothing to suspect outwardly. I felt suddenly frantic. I wanted to crash my clenched fist into this cheerful little face before me. I controlled myself with an effort and spoke normally.

"Yes. Of course. In a day or two. You must excuse my impatience!"

We had a quick dinner and a drink and turned in. I hardly slept. Fate seemed to be determined to make a fool of me.

Next morning York was off early to his office.

"Have a look round the Club if I were you," he called cheerily from his car. "You'll find it just off the Mall where the early bungalow numbers are—somewhere around No. 5 I think. It's the oasis here!"

But I did not move out of the bungalow. Something told me to stay there, something weird and uncanny. I thought of Traill's spirit. Perhaps it was him trying to convey a message to me.

But at eleven o'clock I had my answer. A peon dressed in white with red and gold braiding knocked at the main front door, a letter in his hand.

"Huzoor, magistrate sahib hai?" he asked respectfully. I shook my head. But my eyes had not missed the handwriting on the envelope. It was Susan's.

"No," I said. "But I will give him the letter."

"Nahin sahib," he broke into pidgin English. "York sahib he give orders letters always to be handed to him straight away. That is why I come here. The postman bring this just now to the office but York sahib he gone somewhere."

"I'm an old friend of his," I explained, convincingly I think. "I'll give him the letter. You need fear nothing at all."

There had obviously been a slip somewhere in York's time table. He had probably been called out urgently in connection with something. The peon looked at me doubtfully, hesitatingly. I held my hand out. Would he hand it over? If he had been anything but an Indian, knowing that I was a stranger to the town if not to the "magistrate sahib"

himself, he would never have done so. But fate was on my side. Your simple Indian type is not so devastatingly untrusting—especially when it saves him trouble not to be so. With a salaam and a parting : "Do not forget, sahib, to give it to my master—otherwise I will lose my position, surely," he was off down the drive and out of the gate.

Inside my room I rapidly set about opening the flap of the envelope with the aid of a moistened knife. The clock on the mantelpiece, the bookcase in the corner, the very walls themselves seemed to shout : "Hurry!"

Inside the envelope was another sealed one, addressed to me at my Bombay address. A note to York said : "We hope to be with you shortly now. Do hurry and post this to Mark—he must be thinking I've forgotten him."

There was a little more, but I did not read it. I did not read the letter addressed to me. What gripped my burning eyes was the address on Susan's note to York. "Pine Cottage, near Pindi Point, Murree Hills."

I rapidly refolded the note and crammed it back into the outer cover along with the letter addressed to me. Regumming the flap, I dried it with the heat from a lighted match, placed it on the mantelpiece in the drawing room, and awaited York's return, placing myself behind the curtains of my room, which opened onto the drawing room. I felt a queer admixture of triumph, bitterness and expectancy—garnished with an over-riding self pity. If York guessed I had recognised Susan's handwriting, how would he act?

The answer was simple when it came. Watching him enter the drawing room from my vantage point I saw him look swiftly round the room and spy the letter on the mantelpiece. His manner was furtive as he walked across to it. At one moment I thought he was looking straight into my eyes through the chink in the curtains. He ripped the envelope open and read the short note addressed to him. Then he groped in a pocket for matches, went to the fireplace, and set light to his own letter and the one addressed to me. I could have laughed had I not felt so insanely bitter. I waited a few minutes and then walked out into the drawing room. He greeted me easily.

"Hallo Sheridan—feel like lunch? By the way, I had a note from Mrs. Mannerling."

"Yes," I said. "I noticed the handwriting. What does she say?"

"Oh, just that they're having a nice quiet time so far and that they love the place."

"What place?" I asked casually, but not too casually. I must not let him suspect that I had opened his letter. His mouth dropped open comically. He was a super actor.

"Well I'm blowed!" he said. "I'm sure she's forgotten to put the address at the head of her letter! Just a moment while I check up on that."

He went off into his room. I waited with a sneer in my heart and a smile on my lips. This was almost pathetic, this play acting. When he returned his face was twisted wryly.

"Just as I thought," he said. "Trust a woman to do that sort of thing. I'm always telling my wife....."

"Surely the postmark at least?" I cut in but he waved an enigmatic deprecating hand.

"I thought of that but it's just our luck that it's one of those horribly smudged affairs."

"Never mind," I said resignedly. "We'll probably hear again in a day or so." In a day or so, I knew, I would be on my way to Murree and York would think I had gone back to Bombay.

I remember him smiling beatifically after me when I left by tonga. I had refused to let him drive me to the station on the grounds that I just would not put him to the needless inconvenience. Poor York. Were there ever such loyal friends of Susan as he and his wife? I was sure though that he did not suspect I was going anywhere else but to Bombay. He could not have credited me with such low propensities and principles as to open his letter in his absence. It was as well, for a word of warning by telegram to Susan and I would reach Pine Cottage too late. It struck me fleetingly again that I was being absolutely ridiculous in this matter, that the intense way I was treating it was pathetic. And yet I could not stop myself with a word or a thought of wisdom. In fact, the bottle of whisky I had bought at the refreshment room on Fyzabad station added to my determination to expose Susan's duplicity—as I termed it.

Murree was as beautiful as ever. Poignant memories flooded over me as my taxi carried me up the winding hill road in the cool of that autumn evening. The magic names of tiny, unimportant villages crowded in on me in spite of my semi drunkenness—Tret, Ghora Gali, Basra Gali, Sunny Bank. I recalled with particular vividness the occasion on which a schoolday friend and I had walked down the then dusty road, before it had been tarred, and back and had received six of the very best from our headmaster for bald-facedly telling him that we had never been anywhere near

the road which was out of bounds—with our boots as white as snow !

The pines and firs were as green as ever, unchanging in their mantle of perennial youth. As we came closer to the purlieus of Murree itself with its chestnut and oak trees proudly donning their garb of russet and gold, my intense preoccupation was interrupted by thoughts of my honeymoon, with all its unforgettable moments of beauty and tender passion. They remained with me as, oblivious to the critical glances directed at my travel stained clothes and unshaven face, I walked through the town itself and down towards Pindi Point where the road branched into two, one going down to my old school. I had seen Pine Cottage many a time when I had been for walks. It was a cosy little place, nestling against the hillside like a child clinging to its mother.

I stood looking down at it for a moment from the upper road, then gazed over its corrugated iron roof into the valley below it. To the left of the cheery looking verandah, falling away from a delightful garden that was a riot of colour was a small drop or *khud* of about ten feet with a ziz-zag pathway ascending it. I cannot describe my feelings as I watched Mrs. York assisting Susan up that pathway, Yolanda following some distance behind. I cannot tell you of the crazy bitter madness that entered my whisky dazed soul and brain.

For Susan's child would obviously soon be born.

Portland had been right. Madame Zhukov had been right. Why did Susan want to deceive me ? I could not work it out. I felt like weeping. My whirling brain overlooked many things—my insistence on marrying Susan—her telling me she couldn't marry me—the possibility that she deceived me only to keep me happy and my bitter mind at rest.

I walked swiftly down towards the bungalow. Somewhere in a tree nearby, I remember, a raven croaked hoarsely. The sun was red as blood as it touched the horizon. My eyes must have been red with murder as I glared into Susan's at last from a distance of twelve inches.

"I thought so !" I sneered. "I've felt something has been going on ! Tcha ! What's the point in living a lie ? So Traill it was ! Be sure your sins....."

"Mark," she said in a voice barely audible, "you've been drinking. Please go away, now that you know. I was trying to save you from any unhappiness. I can explain so that....."

"There's no need for any explanation!" I shouted. "Do you think you can possibly explain away Traill's bastard child? By God, it's too much for any man!"

In a frenzy of blind, half drunk rage I reached out before Mrs. York could interfere and grasped Susan's blouse, ripping it across and spitting out at her: "I thought I'd seen the last of prostitutes when my wife....."

"Let her go, you filthy beast!" snapped Mrs. York suddenly, finding her voice and strength. Her powerful hands gripped my arm. I swung wildly away from her and struck out at her in my uncontrollable fury. Somehow my whirling fists missed her and struck Susan with dull thuds on face and breast. She reeled backwards and a sudden sane stab of horror shot through me, sobering me, as I saw her teetering there, blood trickling from her mouth. Yolanda screamed shrilly.

"Susan!" I yelled, and leaped to catch her. But I was too late. Her pathetic body, heavy with the child within her, fell, bumping through ground twice before coming to rest at the bottom of the khud.

I was weeping hysterically by the time I reached her side and I remember Mrs. York was cursing like a man. We carried her still form into the house and a word from Mrs. York sent me frantically up the hill for a doctor.

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## *Part Four: The Story of Susan Mannering*

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### CHAPTER XXVI

Love is no toy. Love is no less  
than a mood of Destiny.

*Lord Dunsany.*

WHEN I married Paul Mannering I loved his half brother, Peter Chambers. That sounds a dreadful confession to make and I have no doubt it is—judged by any standard.

We were married at St. Thomas's Church, Calcutta, in which town Paul happened to be on a month's leave from his estate in Selangor, Malaya. I was twenty-one and Peter twenty-three. Paul was thirty-five. That was before war broke out. Paul was handsome in a florid sort of way, with hard grey eyes and mouth and a "cavalry" moustache. His gaze was direct and forthright and even in the first few minutes I knew him, gave me no small indication of a spirit that was courageous, obstinate and more than a little truculent.

Peter was something of a contrast—but for his courage. Clean of limb and with those tough yet handsome features which seem common among Americans, he captured my young heart as soon as I was introduced to him, which was, incidentally, at a private tennis club in Russel Street. An attractive quality of shyness served as additional fire to my romantic imagination. Of course I took hardly any notice of him outwardly and I was sure he did not know how I felt. He seemed very attached to his half brother. I say "seemed" but there was obviously a great deal of hero worship mixed up in his regard. You could see it shining out of his eyes when he talked to Paul or about him.

I regretted my assumed nonchalance where Peter was concerned for he was obviously the type which never makes advances without some sort of encouragement. He remained in the background while Paul, bolder and more enterprising,

eclipsed him in attention to me. I think Peter was under the impression that his half brother deserved me more than he did, so great was his opinion of him. The very air of sacrifice that seemed to lurk under the covert glances I caught him casting at me sometimes made me angry and challenged the woman in me. I thought, rather unreasonably I admit, that he should have asserted himself more and gone out of his way to impress me. Then it struck me that that was rather a vain attitude. Perhaps the boy didn't think anything of me at all. A woman finds it hard indeed to explain why she marries one man when she loves another. I think it is a sort of spiteful urge which prompts her, dating back to primitive, prehistoric days, regardless of whether she knows her act hurts its victim or not. She might not even know whether that victim cares for her but it gives her some queer satisfaction to deprive him of something he might have got if he had been bold enough to love her. She preserves her pride by not encouraging the man she loves and pretends to sneer at him in her heart afterwards.

When I married Paul, Peter was best man. In vain did I search for any signs of weakening on his face and in his bearing. Whatever he felt he did not show it. I remember thinking to myself furiously : "The perfect, loyal brother!" as he stood a little to one side and handed the ring to the priest. I must confess that in my foolish heart then, before the altar, there peeped above the surface of my thoughts a tiny mental enquiry—would Peter be so loyal when we had lived—the three of us, some time together on Paul's estate? I wondered and, woman-like, found no small measure of satisfaction in my wonder.

The Rawlins Estate in Selangor was a large one of some four thousand acres of rubber and coffee. Peter looked after the rubber factory in particular and helped to control the labourers of Fields 1 to 10 in general. Paul often confided in me a little condescendingly that his half brother was good at his work, that he didn't know what he would do without him.

It soon became obvious to me at the Club that Peter was much more popular than my husband. Somehow the fact annoyed me still further. Of course I did not show my annoyance. Even when we travelled further afield for entertainment, to K.L.—Kuala Lumpur—or Banting or spent a week end shopping at Pritchard's in Penang, Peter was the one who came in for most of the attention. In Malaya everyone seems to know everyone else in the planting business and Peter Chambers appeared to be known—and liked—best from Negri Sembilan and Penang to Singapore and Malacca.

"People seem to think Peter's a God or something!" I remember saying to Paul one evening as we were dressing for tennis at the Club. He looked at me in surprise.

"What the devil's the matter with you, Sue? You sound annoyed. What's the boy been up to?"

"Oh nothing. Nothing at all. But it's a wonder to me he doesn't get a swelled head with all the adulation and adoration that's lavished on him! I saw a bevy of beauties in the Spotted Dog in K.L. the other night whose gaze and chatter was positively worshipful."

He burst into a short laugh as he wound his scarf round his neck and picked up his tennis racket.

"The girl's jealous!" he said amusedly, but I thought I detected a touch of anger in his voice.

"Don't be utterly ridiculous!" I snapped. "I can't stand anyone who is so perfectly, so beautifully popular—that's all. It means there's something wrong somewhere—some weakness of character. No one who is worth calling someone can get along without making enemies."

He chuckled and hit me playfully on the seat with his racket.

"Peter seems to get along like that all right though. And you can't say he's weak anywhere, really. There's something wrong with your psychology. Come on, let's go."

That night, after the tennis, I thought I would amuse myself a little at Peter's expense. Paul had retired to the bar for his usual three "stengah" and I was feeling pretty bored with the rest of the company, who were discussing plans for an excursion to Singapore for Easter.

I remember the moon that night. Anyone who has been in Malaya will tell you that a full moon there is brighter, more liquid, more full of mystery than it is anywhere else. But perhaps that's only a Malayan fantasy. What I do know is that the moon was shining over the rubber trees in the distance and the oleander bushes and roses in the Club garden in a manner that made me feel defiant.

Peter had been playing billiards and I timed my exit on to the verandah to coincide with his putting down his cue. I wondered if he would follow me. He rarely allowed himself and me to be alone, a fact which secretly flattered me and yet irritated me. Tonight seemed unique—in more respects than one. For he did come after me.

"Glorious night, Susan," he said, filling his pipe. Even the way he did that irritated me and yet made me want to kiss the strong looking brown fingers that pressed the tobacco

down and curled round the bowl. I went gaily down the steps without a word. I knew that would make him follow me even further. It did.

"You're behaving very peculiarly tonight," he said reproachfully, a tiny smile round his strong looking mouth.

"Am I?" I enquired innocently, emphasising the first word. We walked side by side down the pathway. A civet cat shot from a bush like a bullet across our path and disappeared into the shadows. Peter caught my elbow. His touch sent a shock coursing through my body. He had never touched me before, though he occupied a room in our bungalow and had his meals with us.

"Yes, indeed you are! And just when I'm wanting to be particularly friendly."

I let my elbow rest where it was. My voice was sarcastic. "Indeed? You certainly have succeeded in keeping your distance the six months we've been here and you've been living with us! What's brought about the sudden change?"

He swung me round suddenly to face him. His lean face was hard in the moonlight. His tone was sharper than I had ever heard it.

"Why do you always sneer at me? You've sneered at me since we met. Am I so detestable?"

"No—but you're vain—you want everyone falling on your neck and telling you what a remarkably fine specimen of manhood you are!" I could not resist the childish words.

He let go my arm and looked hard at me. I could see his lips droop slightly at the corners with hurt. I felt a beast. But I loved him so. I longed for him to kiss me, to take me in his arms and bend my head back and run his fingers through my hair.

"I'm sorry you think that," he muttered and turned away. But he stopped and turned back before he had gone three paces. His face looked white and deathly in the moonlight.

"Anyway," he went on, "you won't have me annoying you much longer. I'm joining the Air Force on Saturday. Going home for training. There seems to be trouble brewing in Europe. I thought you'd be a bit more friendly when I gave you the news—but you've cut the ground from under my feet."

I could not answer. Something seemed wrong with my throat. I watched him walk away with my heart sinking and the tears near my eyes. Somehow, in that brief second when we had looked into each others eyes, I had seen his very soul. He loved me. Oh, the fool, the silly hero

worshipping fool! Why had he sacrificed me to this wonderful brother of his? Why *hadn't* he a mind as vain as I accused him of having? Truly it is those who make least effort to gain the regard of others who gain it most.

I went back into the Club with my feet like lead. Paul appeared even more arrogant and unlikeable when we got home but I knew the impression existed mainly in my own mind. God knows I had never loved him. And now I felt I almost hated him.

"You didn't tell me Peter was joining the Air Force," I said as we undressed and prepared for our baths. I could not prevent a slight inflection of accusation creeping into my tone.

"Didn't know it myself till this evening," he returned, his hard grey eyes looking into mine with an accentuation of the surprise they had shown earlier in the evening when I had so childishly criticised Peter. "Why—are you interested? From the way you've always treated him and the way you talked this evening the news should be enough to make you run three times round the *padang* at the back of the house—with joy."

I pulled my dressing gown round me and went into the bathroom. Paul followed me in.

"Look here," he said quietly. "You're not in love with Peter, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" I snapped as I turned on the hot water tap. For some reason or the other I hazily remembered a few words from the Bible—something that went like: "before the cock crows thrice thou shalt deny me twice."

Paul's arm crept round me and pulled me up from where I stooped. Then he held me to him and whispered: "I couldn't bear the idea of you falling for anyone else, Sue. If you ever did—and if anyone else fell for you, I think I'd kill both of you."

He said it with such feeling, his eyes harder than ever, his big arms crushing me to him more fiercely of a sudden, making it almost impossible for me to breathe, that I believed him and I knew in that moment that although I did not love him he loved me deeply.

The next two days and evenings were unbearable. That Wednesday and Thursday of 1939—will I ever forget them! As Saturday loomed closer I began to feel desperate, almost as if I would suddenly lose control of myself and throw myself in Peter's arms when he was leaving for Singapore. And all the time Peter kept assiduously out of my way.

But on Friday night I could not bear it any longer. Fate, apparently toying with our feelings, had sent Paul on a brief visit to Banting on business. He had said his final good-bye to Peter before leaving. And here we were, the man I loved and I, sitting out on the lawn because I had practically forced him to sit with me, the Malayan twilight closing in round the colourful garden. Our Malay boy brought out drinks and slid quietly away again.

"Peter," I said suddenly, almost afraid at the loud sound of my voice in my ears, "Peter, I'm sorry you're going. *Really sorry.*"

It was not quite dark and as he looked at me I read understanding in his eyes. He knew now, I felt sure, why I had kept away from him, just as I had known the other day why he had avoided me.

"So," he said quietly. "Is that why you've sneered at me?" There was a queer little smile round his mouth.

"Yes, Peter," I answered like a child. "I've always loved you—from the first moment we met at that tennis club in Calcutta."

He was silent for a while. Then :

"You women are strange creatures," he murmured. "I never dreamt....."

"And your type is even stranger," I returned. "Women don't hunt men, Peter—the men have to take their chance against others. That's the law of Nature, isn't it—or rather, one of them? We feel cheap if....."

He held up a hand.

"Don't say it—there's no need to." He lowered his face into that hand and rubbed for a while at his temples. Then he looked up again, white and tense. "I'm a dope, Susan. I'm sorry. I think I'd better get out now. Leave the bungalow I mean. I can put up at the station for tonight."

I would be a prude and a liar if I were to say I had not wanted him to stay that night after we knew how each felt about the other. I wanted him with every fibre of my being, every thought in my brain. I went across to him and, touching him on the shoulder, whispered : "Why don't you stay, Peter? Paul's not here. We could talk far into the night—there is so much to talk about now—so much lost time to be made up for in so short a time. Peter, do stay."

Condemn me if you will. But if you have ever loved so that your mind and body ache with the power of your loving, spare me a little of your charity.

Peter soon made me realise I had made a mistake. I was dealing with a hero worshipper, a loyal half brother. He was on his feet, a touch of anger in his eyes.

"We couldn't do that to him!" he gritted. My temper frayed at the imminence of his departure, this empty ending to my months of longing for him.

"You prude!" I snapped back. "I don't love him. Never did. Besides he'd never know—and what you don't know cannot possibly hurt you. Why....."

And then I experienced one wild moment of bitter sweet triumph as he took me in his arms almost brutally and pressed his hard mouth hungrily to mine. Suddenly he let me go.

"You little fool!" he grated. "Oh you little fool—you don't know what you're doing. I'm going to pack now. For God's sake don't try and see me again. Good-bye Susan."

But I did help him to pack and, with my heart breaking, I let him go without making a fool of myself or tempting him again.

## CHAPTER XXVII

TRY as I would I could not prevent my feelings showing during the next few weeks. Paul would look at me at meal times, or in the evenings when we sat out in the garden, with a dull expression of sulky displeasure. I felt sure he had guessed my secret but he would not broach the subject, even as a joke. I thought this strange, and it made me feel uncomfortable, for he was usually blunt and to the point, as I have already said, with little thought for any embarrassment caused by his so being. He had an unhappy knack of calling a spade a spade even if tact and the general situation demanded a softer statement.

We carried on with the same old round—visits to the other estates, tennis and swimming at the Club, and occasional shopping trips to Robinson's in Kuala Lumpur or Pritchard's in Penang and Singapore. I suddenly found that I was sick of the Malay I had loved. The rubber and coffee fields and the tangled, threatening jungle itself held no more fascination for me.

One evening, at dusk, Paul and I were walking down the main estate road, bound for the Wilson's house when a snake, apparently dazed and disturbed in its hole by a heavy shower of rain which had just fallen, slid from the shrubbery and under my very feet. I could not prevent my foot alighting on it. It whipped round like lightning and I screamed and threw myself into Paul's arms as I felt the sharp prick of its fangs in my ankle.

"Paul," I sobbed hysterically. "Paul—it's bitten me!"

He swiftly disengaged my arms from about him, made me sit down, whipped my shoe and walking sock off and a pen-knife from his pocket. I know he hoped to see the double pair of fang marks of a non-poisonous snake but glancing down terrifiedly in those few dreadful seconds my heart sank. It was too dark for me to see any marks on my skin but Paul suddenly ripped the flesh of my foot with quick,

decisive little slashes of his knife. As his lips closed over the wound I fainted.

Both of us were laid up for three days, Doctor Warner and large doses of whisky succeeding in driving the rest of the cobra poison from our systems.

When I could think clearly enough I reached across towards Paul's bed and took his hand. I felt terribly guilty and treacherous in that moment.

"You saved my life, Paul," I whispered. He snorted at the ceiling.

"Don't make it sound so melodramatic, Sue! People are doing that sort of thing every day in the queer corners of the world—for someone they love. Besides, I often think there are worse snakes than those that crawl on their neat little bellies, don't you?"

He turned his head slightly to look into my eyes. I'm afraid I could not meet that hard, honest gaze of his. I did not know whether he alluded to me or to Peter.

I tried to make it up with him after that, remorsefully conscious of the weeks I had neglected him. His acceptance of my reformed behaviour was gracious and grateful. The tenor of things in general became less strained. I began to find life less unbearable, strangely enough, and then, when our Tamil cook's wife had a baby suddenly one night, I had plenty to do to keep my mind even more occupied with thoughts other than harrowing ones of Peter and my mental faithlessness to Paul. I was glad in a way that Peter never wrote to me. Even Paul only got short, businesslike notes at long intervals.

Poonamma's baby girl was the most extraordinarily sweet atom of humanity. There was something about the whimsical, tiny black face and huge dark brown eyes that tugged at my heart. And then, when it suddenly caught pneumonia and died, I made a fool of myself and cried almost as if I had been its mother.

Paul was sympathetic in a sheepish sort of way.

"Sue, you've got to realise it's only a cook's child, you know," he said after the pathetic funeral ceremony.

"I wish I had a baby, Paul," I said dully and he looked uncomfortably down at the ground and then left the room.

Next day Poonamma brought a shy, wide-eyed Tamil girl of about twelve to interview me and asked if I would employ her.

"But master employs all the coolies," I said.

"Yes, madam. But in the house I meant," was the answer. "She is my sister's child. My sister and her husband were both bitten by snakes a week ago when they lighted on a nest. This child is growing up. She has already undergone her maturity ceremony. I am afraid of the young lads of the estate, Madam."

I smiled at this ingenuousness—and ingenuity. She did not mind me, apparently, being afraid of the young lads! Or taking the responsibility for whatever might happen to this cheeky looking scrap. Looking at the child's bright, alert features and her lithe little body, already mature, I felt that even the lads of the estate might well soon be afraid of her and her wiles.

"What's her name?" I asked and Poonamma mentioned an impossible Tamil name.

"I'll call her Yolanda," I said. "And I will employ her in the house."

I found that the child did much to fill in many lonely hours and weeks, and her bright chatter and continual industry even apparently won Paul's heart. She learnt English with true Tamil efficiency and ruled the rest of the house servants with a rod of iron.

"You treat her almost as if she were your own child," murmured Paul apropos of nothing one evening as we sat in the garden and watched Yolanda interfering with the gardener's work and pruning some rose bushes.

"She is rather sweet, Paul, you must admit."

"But how on earth can you call any of these black scoundrels sweet! Entertaining, yes. Amusing too. She's all right now, I suppose. But in a year or two she'd be ready to cut your throat, like all the rest of them, with delightful innocence if it meant she could get an extra half dollar a day in wages."

"What nonsense!"

Paul did not pursue the matter further. I had the feeling suddenly that he hated Yolanda, that I had been mistaken in supposing that she had won his heart. But one thing was certain—through all his somewhat sulky affection and his sudden, fierce love making, he loved me deeply. I prayed for a child, thinking it might make him less grim if we had one. But prayers can go unanswered. I can hardly describe my own feelings towards Paul in those weeks and months. I knew I did not love him and yet I could not act the frigid wife with him. I think maybe I was afraid of the under-current of power and jealousy that seemed to constantly

lurk beneath the surface of his everyday behaviour. And I think, too, I was always a little ashamed of the way I had been ready to deceive him where Peter was concerned.

Then came that dreadful 3rd of September when the second World War began to sweep the globe. We seemed very remote from it all in Malaya and had nothing but the newspapers to remind us of its ever-widening tentacles. Paul bemoaned the fact that little was said of Japan.

"Seems as if they're being fools enough to overlook a power that will suddenly stab us in the back and eventually have another crack at Russia after finishing China," he would say. "We know Japan's modelled on the same lines as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and yet we seem to welcome her in trade—in fact India itself still sends her thousands of tons of scrap metal! When the time is ripe I'm afraid we will find Japan's not as weak as the China Incident makes her look."

We were discussing the international situation one evening, having decided to forego the Club, when a deafening report inside the house made us leap from our chairs. Paul banged into the hat-stand as he made for the nearest door. I was close on his heels. The sound had come from his small gun room. Yolanda, her face a peculiar green shade, still stood petrified, one of Paul's twelve bore shot-guns looking gigantic in her hands by comparison with her body. One of the walls was peppered with shot. Paul's face went purple.

"You bloody little idiot!" he shouted. "Get out of here! How many times have I told you to stop sneaking about this room? If I catch you here again I'll whip you within an inch of your life!"

He snatched the gun roughly from her hands and she simply flew from the room, whimpering as she went. Paul broke the gun and removed the other cartridge. He was breathing hard as he cleaned the used barrel. I stood and watched him, outwardly calm but inwardly quailing at the sudden, extraordinary viciousness that had swept over him.

"She'll be shooting someone one of these days!" he muttered as he replaced the gun on the wall and kicked away the stool Yolanda had used to reach it with. He looked into my white, set face for a moment, stung by my silence I think, and burst out afresh, a tinge of red in his eyes.

"Go on, why don't you say it? Why don't you tell me I shouldn't frighten the little black bastard! That she meant nothing, that I'm a bad tempered brute!"

"I hadn't thought of saying anything like that, Paul," I returned quietly. "But I do hope this won't make you

dislike Yolanda any more than you already do. It's just childish curiosity that makes her come into your gun room. She must have been scared out of her life when that gun went off."

"Childish curiosity!" he snorted and flung out of the room.

\* \* \*

Came the never to be forgotten day in December when a plane landed on the sweeping *padang* at the back of the house, just off the estate. I was wandering aimlessly about the garden at the time and watched the circling machine with mild interest. As it manoeuvred round to face the wind and landed, a sharp wild hope sprang up within me and swept away the months of mental calm I had been experiencing. The *padang* wasn't an aerodrome. No plane had landed there in the last year. Might this not be Peter?

When I saw his lean figure walking down the outside pathway towards the gate of our bungalow I felt faint. It was no dream. No hallucination. He wore a flier's overalls and carried his helmet in his hand, his fair curly hair gleaming gold in the morning sunlight.

"Susan!" he called from the gate. "You look as if you've seen a ghost! You can't stand there like that you know. Not when a perfectly good pilot officer is dying of thirst and he knows you stock the best brand of tea in the Federated Malay States!"

I still could not move. I cannot really describe how I felt. Love can do strange things to one's mind and body and nerves. I had to wait for him to come up to me before I reached out shaking hands to take his. It was only when I felt the warm touch of those hands that I found I could smile and speak.

"Peter dear—this sort of thing is enough to startle anybody! Come on inside. I'll have Yolanda get you some tea in a jiffy. Why didn't you tell Paul or me that you were coming?"

"Secret griff—sorry—secret information!" he laughed. "Didn't know myself till a week ago. I'll whisper in your ear special despatches to Washington from Churchill himself. Keep it under your hat though—this fifth column business has got everyone jumpy. I've even heard that the Malays are regarding us *orang patehs* with suspicion because of Japanese underground work!"

I squeezed his arm. Oh it was good to feel the muscles rippling under his grubby old overall, to see the tan of his

smooth skin on face and hands. There is something about Nature—which is, I and many of us believe, God—that brings a song to every nerve of one's body when one touches the man one loves—especially after months of absence. A golden haze of happy, breathless urgency commands one's mind and body and soul to a glorious, indescribably beautiful fusion with his. A certain recklessness, too, enters into one's being. One laughs and gazes unashamedly into his eyes, a secret message from deep within telling him through one's own: "I am yours, for ever, for anything you may care to do with me. I love you."

But perhaps Nature also has ironic streaks throughout her make-up. For it was in these few seconds of sweet recklessness of mind that I suddenly became aware of Paul standing on the verandah. He must have come in for a few minutes from one of the nearer fields, entering the house from one of the side doors.

"It's Peter!" I called, striving to cloak my momentary embarrassment at the look of accusation in his eyes. That brief severe look only lasted for the fraction of a second however. He smiled and came down the steps to meet us, hands outstretched towards his half brother.

"By jove, I'm glad to see you, old man!" he said warmly and they stood for a moment looking over each other. I could not help but realise how handsome both of them were as they stood there, and how the old worshipful look was again in Peter's eyes. "You here for long?"

"I've had a pretty gen trip and—well—I'm a day ahead of schedule, so I could leave tomorrow," Peter laughed as we climbed the steps and sat down in the wicker chairs of the verandah. He stretched his legs luxuriously. "God! It's good to get out of that cramped cockpit!"

"I'll bet it is," concurred Paul. "Well, look, I can't stay here all morning, I'm afraid. Just came over to collect a gun. There's a cobra hiding out in a bundle of brushwood in Field 5. I'll see you at lunch time. What about your plane? Will it be all right where it is?"

Peter slapped his thigh.

"Glad you reminded me before someone sabotaged it!" he grinned. "I was going to ask you to put a guard of a few coolies on it, under a ganger. Slipped my mind for the moment in the excitement of seeing you two and this delightful old place again. One gets a bit lonely and homesick, you know! Yes, it'd be a bit of a bind if anything happened to the old crate—I'd be courtmartialled!"

Paul went off, swinging down the pathway, and after a quarter of an hour Yolanda came out with the tea. I saw her covertly weighing Peter up and was glad when she appeared to approve of him, a smile springing to her dark features. She may have seen him before on the estate but on the other hand may not have been in the fields he had helped to supervise.

"She's a cute looking little scoundrel!" said Peter after she had whisked inside again. "Where did you pick her up?"

I had no doubt that she was peeping out, unseen, from behind one of the chicks of the doors. I told him about her arrival. Then I teased him about the slang he seemed to have so smoothly picked up. He laughed.

"Oh, that! Every trade has its marks, it appears. There are a whole lot of expressive words—though somewhat mystifying to the tyro! We find, after a few weeks, that it's hard to remember other people don't know that 'griff' means information, a 'sprogue' is a flier who has only just got his wings, or that a 'winker' is a wing commander, or that 'gen' means pretty good or general!"

It was delightful to watch him as he spoke. He seemed so much more cheerful than he used to be. There was a smile in his eyes and round his lips. To me it seemed only yesterday that I had almost shamelessly offered him my love and any brief happiness it might have given him. I wondered if our parting was as fresh in his mind. A woman lives a great deal in the past, I think, a great deal more so than most men. Most of her happiness comes from the past. And she never quite forgets the first man the sight of whom made her soul and body long for his.

We were still chatting gaily when Paul returned for lunch. He and Peter began talking about the possibility of developments in the Pacific involving Japan. I sank momentarily into the background. Few women can think of anything but love in certain circumstances.

That afternoon I had Peter to myself again. The house was quiet. Yolanda had gone off to her quarters and the men servants to theirs. A breathless feeling of expectation crept into me as Peter and I talked. Again, as once before, the fact that he would soon be leaving constricted my heart. I could not bear it any longer after a few short minutes of chatting on light topics. I suddenly got up and went to him and stood looking down at him where he sat.

"Peter darling," I said in a whisper, "you've never been out of my thoughts."

There was a look of pleading in his face and my heart beat frantically in triumph. How well a woman knows when the man she wants has weakened. He looked down at my feet.

"Susan....." he began, but I knelt down suddenly and put my arms round his neck.

"Peter, do you know what it is to long for someone till you think you will die with the pain of it?"

His voice choked slightly as he answered.

"Yes, I do. Susan, I've....."

And then again I felt the bitter sweet agony of a woman's triumph as he buried his face in my hair and let his arms creep round me. Only this time our senses, our very bodies, were in harmony and not torn by antagonism or doubt or loyalty.

"I can't help it, Peter," I whispered, almost fainting with the joy of those few moments, "I know it's wrong but I can't help it. Even when he makes love to me I shut my eyes and imagine it's not him but you, my darling."

The sudden passionate increase in the pressure of his arms about me was my final reward. Was I a fool and a wanton at heart? I don't know. Can any woman answer me?

## CHAPTER XXVIII

PAUL and I, augmented by fifty per cent of the population of the nearest *kampongs*, watched Peter take off next day. He waved from the cockpit and my woman's heart contained a song because he looked so grim and unhappy. The plane zoomed into the air, leaving a long swirl of dust behind it. It circled once above us, Peter waving once more before pulling the cowling of the cockpit over his head. Then it rapidly became a speck in the distance. Paul turned to me with a baffling look in his eyes.

"Well, I wonder when we'll see him again?" he said. I might have been mistaken but the tone of his voice indicated triumphant expectation.

We did not see Peter again for two years. And who could forget that December of 1941, with the ghastly weeks that followed culminating in the tragic fall of Singapore, that bastion of British naval supremacy in the Far East. But I anticipate.

Let me go back to the day I found I was going to have a baby. It will live in my memory for ever. When I told Paul he just looked at me in dead silence for a long while. I thought his cold stare would never end.

"It's not my child," he said at last.

"Paul!" I gasped. "What are you saying?"

"You heard me. It's not my child. You've been unfaithful to me Susan! And that's putting it in the good old fashioned way. It's Peter's child. You know it."

Yes, I did know it. I'm not ashamed to confess it now, after all this time has passed. But on that day I hoped I could deceive Paul about it, that he would never know. Condemn me if you will. I'm not an angel. So few of us are. And when a woman loves she forgets honour and vows, duty and conventionality. She realises that a woman in love cannot be an angel..... only a woman. Yes, I am not

ashamed to confess it now. But then, on that lovely morning in January, my heart was cold with fear.

"You've been very foolish!" muttered Paul. I noticed that his lips were taut, stretched tight across his teeth. The very mildness of his words compared to that expression struck terror into me. "Yes," he continued, "you've been very foolish indeed. You would have been safe enough if it weren't physically and medically impossible for me to beget a child."

He got up and walked down the verandah steps and into the garden. And at that moment Fate gave my whirling thoughts respite in the form of visitors—the Wilsons. Their old Ford drove in at the gate and Paul and I entertained them as if there was absolutely nothing wrong between us. I have often thought since how amazingly resilient can be the human mind. It can stand up and function under the most appalling of shocks. Paul behaved marvellously, even embracing me affectionately once when he had to pass my chair on his way into the house for more cigarettes. But I knew some horrible nightmare would follow as soon as our visitors were gone.

To my amazement nothing of the sort happened. You may not believe what I write. You may, with every justification based on human psychology, dismiss my statement as being totally unreal and Paul's actions beyond the pale of normal behaviour under such circumstances. I cannot force you to believe me. I myself could hardly believe my senses when Paul suddenly buried his face on my breast when we had undressed for bed and sobbed like a child for a few dreadful seconds.

"It's not your fault, Sue," he muttered at last. "Somehow I've known all along that you loved him—and not me. I guess it's something deep inside a man tells him that. I was going to set fire to his plane that day he arrived—if he had not been staying as long as he did. I wanted you to have a child darling. I knew somehow that he would break faith with me. I knew, when I was walking round supervising the tapping that afternoon, that I intended to sneak back to the house, find you in each other's arms, and kill both of you. I did come back—as far as the gate. And then I returned to the fields."

I stroked his hair absently. It was pathetic to listen to him. So blunt and obstinate and truculent as a rule. They say all men are children at heart, even the worst murderers. He did not think it was my fault. Some strange sentiment prompted him to act against all the known laws of human nature—or animal nature too, for that matter—against the

laws of possession. I felt intensely relieved. But I did not realise then how grey my skies were going to be. How fitly I would be punished for my weakness, my love.

Peter's child was born dead. I thought that that was the final chastisement for my sin—the finishing touch to the constant flagellation that cut my soul, the flagellation that had as its most cutting injury Paul's care and affection and lack of censure or condemnation. I would have felt less miserable during those months of pregnancy if he had always been throwing my unfaithfulness in my face. His very unnaturalness struck terror into my heart each day. I had had the constant feeling for weeks that he would some day murder me in cold blood.

I shall never forget Paul's face as he looked at the pathetic scrap of lifeless humanity that was to have been a symbol of so exquisite a passage of love that it lives in my memory today and will for all time.

"It's dead, Sue," he muttered as the doctor took his arm and led him outside. I think I loved Paul then, for those few agonising hours. I don't quite know. I do know though that Paul became even more strange after that—over-affectionate, over-thoughtful. I often had horrible thoughts of the Mussalmans who fattened up their goats in preparation for the kill at Bakr-Id.

But the still-born child was not the greyest cloud in my overcast sky. The swirling black vapour gathered rapidly to strike further horror at me—horror I would never have thought endurable. It is strange how all of us really get our deserts. Our friends and acquaintances may think the world of us. They may endow us with all sorts of wonderful qualities that are in reality but the most meagre of ordinary human graces. But some all-seeing power weeds out the lurking evil in us and arranges, or so it seems to me, for its neutralisation by payment in full. I had never thought much about God. The blue sky, flowers, trees, butterflies, birds, glorious sunsets and sunrises—these with other beautiful things had been God enough for me. It always seemed to me that they were more worth while, more genuine than the mysterious being so many people imagined to be dominating our every move and thought. But now I realise that there is such a being—a just God—one that rewards you when you have finished paying the sum you deserved to pay.

The second world war gathered momentum in the West and in the Middle East. Everyone has followed those stirring events, from Dunkirk to the present day, with interest, so let me not make the mistake of trying to recount them again in competition with the world's best historians and journalists.

But the world did not expect the sudden overpowering onslaught in the Far East, that part of the world, that is, that was not associated with the Fascist movement. The treacherous blow struck by Japan changed the whole outlook of the war. But even after Pearl Harbour, Guam, Wake, Hong Kong, even after the Japanese had landed at Kota Bharu we in Malaya could not believe that this fourth class nation could do more than scratch ineffectually at the surface of the foundations of the United Nations' power in the Pacific. The long war with China had left Japan exceedingly weak, was the general consensus of opinion. And it was the thought predominant amongst us when hostilities opened in the Peninsula.

"Oh, our boys will hold them all right," was the opinion expressed in Clubs and estates. "They can't move any further down the peninsula."

But it was unreal, that lightning advance when it came—right through Malaya from top to bottom. The world could not believe it. I don't think even Hitler believed it for a while.

It was pathetic to see disorganised bands of our troops retreating through the rubber trees and down the roads and pathways, without leaders, many of them without equipment, dirty, dead tired, and dying of thirst. In spite of the stout resistance against great odds one realised that here in Malaya was being fought a battle in blind chaos. The enemy travelled light. Our forces travelled heavy. The enemy had been trained to concert pitch for jungle warfare, even the China incident being considered by experts a vast training scheme and area for the sons of Nippon. We had been caught too unprepared to train sufficient men so ruthlessly.

We could hear the distant boom of the guns. Hundreds of Tamil labourers from the north poured southwards towards Singapore and Malacca, labourers who had only nine months previously been incited to revolt, in the lightning Tamil Riots, against their masters by Japanese propaganda. All our servants except Yolanda joined the colossal exodus. Practically all Paul's labourers left the estate. Orders were passed by the Governor for the evacuation of all women and children—orders that were subsequently denied by him. But Paul refused to move, and I would not move without him.

Came the day Peter landed once more on the *padang* at the back of the house. He was dirty and dishevelled, his eyes wide and staring with fatigue, matted bloodstains on his cheeks and neck. He swallowed a whisky neat on the verandah and then took my arm.

"You've got to get out of here!" he snapped. "Do you realise the Japs are only six miles or so away?"

"I've told Paul so many times!" I felt like whimpering with the sudden fear his words brought. The past few weeks had torn my nerves to shreds. "But he won't leave. He says to hell with the Japs—he can look after us all right. He seems convinced we'll drive them back again. He....."

But at that moment Paul himself arrived at the run. His face wore a smile that set my heart thudding frantically against my ribs. There was something demoniacal about it. His teeth showed in that snarling grin as he looked at Peter.

"I thought it was your plane, Peter," he said through tight lips. "I knew you'd come back some day. Have another drink old man."

He walked into the house like one in a dream and I clutched Peter's arm, whispering crazily, urgently:

"Peter—he's mad! He knows! He's known all this time. The child—our child, Peter darling—yours and mine—was born dead. He's pretended to care for me so much. Has never blamed us. But I see now why he never said anything about it not being *your* fault. Peter—please go—now. I'm *sure* he means harm, darling. He's been so queer of late."

But Paul was out again, smiling even more dreadfully than before. The distant guns and the thud of mortars accompanied his speech. In his hand he carried a revolver. He spoke very softly, almost caressingly, in that kind of voice one knows is deadly.

"My dear old Peter, I've been longing to meet you again—longing for two years. I did hope to shoot you in front of your own child, but that can't be. It was born dead. That was a bad job you did, old chap—a very bad job. You should be ashamed of yourself. Now I'll have to shoot you all alone. Tough on you."

It must have been a strange tableau, the three of us standing there in the quiet that eerily surrounded us but for the distant boom and crack of weapons. I remember the feeling of sheer unreality that filled me as I watched Paul raise his revolver slowly till it pointed at Peter's face.

"Have you anything to say?" he sneered. "Any last wish? You know—good old firing squad stuff. Cigarette? No? Tut, tut, man, you're taking it very hard!"

"Put your gun down," said Peter steadily. "You've taken leave of your senses, Paul."

His level tone seemed to infuriate Paul, who suddenly began to shout, a thin film of froth appearing at the corners of his mouth.

"You're pretty cool aren't you, you bloody rampant traitor! You live on my hospitality, on the job I give you, and steal my wife, body and soul. By God, I never thought we'd entertain such filth in our family! Poor Susan, she didn't stand a chance with your cursed wiles."

I thought for a moment he was alluding to me with sarcasm but was amazed to see sudden tears spring to his red rimmed eyes. He shook his head viciously as if to clear it and I could see his finger tighten on the trigger.

"Paul," I murmured soothingly, "please let him go. I was as much to blame as him. More so, in fact."

He kept his eyes on Peter while he snapped impatiently in reply.

"Just like a woman—always ready to take the blame to save some worthless swine from getting what he deserves. No, Sue, I can't let him go. We'll get rid of him and then move south to Singapore and then to Ceylon—Africa. Now Peter, say your prayers. We've wasted enough time already. I'm going to count ten. That should be time enough for you."

He began to count in a dull, monotonous voice, the smile gone from his face, his eyes almost dreamy. It was when he reached eight that there was a sudden roar of sound behind me and Paul's face took on an expression of dreadful surprise while a large red stain spread over his heart. I screamed as he toppled slowly forward. Yolanda dropped the shot gun and suddenly knelt at my feet.

"Madam, forgive me," she whimpered. "Forgive me. But he would have killed both of you. I know. For I have heard him muttering so many a time, so often when you have not been near. He very mad, madam—very, very mad. Poor master. His soul now peaceful."

I was petrified for a few moments. Then I reached down and patted her sleek black head. God knows I had never hated Paul even if I had never loved him. And God knows I had not wanted him dead. But I felt that this amazing child had, with incredible nerve averted a worse tragedy than the one that would have resulted had an insane Paul shot his half brother and maybe me as well, probably never regaining his own sanity, or only regaining it sufficiently to destroy himself in his remorse or to give himself up for hanging. Peter suddenly brought me back to reality.

"We'd better go, Susan," he muttered. "There's not a minute to be lost. At any moment some of these small Jap infiltration parties may break through our lines and reach these estates. They operate miles ahead of their main bodies. Pack a handful of things and come with me. I'll fly you to Rangoon. Get all the money you can lay your hands on. You too, Yolanda. Hurry."

We were making our way to the *padang* and Peter's aeroplane and were within sight of the machine when a hoarse voice barked at us from some shrubbery some distance to our left.

"Halt, white people, or you are dead!"

There was nothing for it but to halt. Peter was carrying a revolver at the ready but he had no chance to use it.

"No good trying anything now," he gritted to me. "We may get a chance later. These chaps may become too busy to keep a really watchful eye on us."

A group of seven men emerged from the bushes, each armed with a Tommy gun and light rifle, with all sorts of odds and ends strapped on their bodies. One man carried what looked like a small folding bicycle. The leader appeared to be an officer. He was slightly taller than the rest and had an autocratic, overbearing manner. He grinned evilly at me, his eyes running over my figure. I felt cold stark fear.

"Where you go?" he asked with a leer. "Home?"

None of us answered. There was, of course, nothing to say. His face took on an expression of sudden rage.

"Where you go I asked!" he snapped. "You will answer."

"We were going—home," said Peter quietly.

"This your home?" he asked next, waving his gun towards our bungalow. I nodded dumbly. There seemed to be forces of pent up evil within his wiry looking little body waiting to be released.

"Come," he ordered, "we will drink and eat there. My men they are thirsty and hungry."

They forced us to turn about at gun point. The officer barked an order to one of the men who swiftly dashed over to Peter's plane, obviously as a guard. Then we retraced our steps to the bungalow. Here the party expressed some surprise at the body of Paul where it lay on the verandah. One of them raised his eyebrows as he looked at Peter and me and asked, "You kill him?"

We did not answer but Yolanda nodded her head speechlessly. There was a chuckle of laughter from them all. Then they calmly seated themselves in the wicker chairs on the verandah and the officer ordered us to produce drinks and food, tinned food that they could eat, under the watchful eye and ready weapon of one of the men who accompanied us inside the house.

"No tricks," said the officer blandly, his eyes running once more over my figure. "No tricks—otherwise we have fun with all of you—good fun with plenty torture."

We brought them food and drinks from the refrigerator and suddenly one of them gripped Yolanda about the waist and pulled her onto his knee, staring into her terrified black face with a smile part curious, part animal and part amused.

"You know how to make love, my pretty black bird who knows how to kill a man?" he asked hoarsely and they all burst into laughter, apparently chaffing him in their own language. It appeared that they challenged him too, for, his face suddenly serious, he ripped Yolanda's bodice and exposed her young breasts amid the roars of approval of his companions and superior. Peter squeezed my arm reassuringly as I turned away, feeling sick and faint. The officer's cooing voice cut into the coarse laughter.

"Why the pretty white bird turn away, eh? Look again, my sweet. No, better still—you come here to me."

I remained petrified, unable to move.

"I said come here!" he repeated more harshly. Peter started forward, his face white, his fists clenched.

"You can't behave like this!" he snapped desperately. "This sort of thing is in contravention of all military and international law! You....."

"Listen to him, Osaki," purred the officer in a pained voice to the man nearest Peter. "Would you hear anyone insult your superior in such an insolent manner?"

The man addressed rose swiftly and with an incredibly quick movement that almost deceived the eye jabbed the butt of his Tommy gun against Peter's jaw. Poor Peter fell like a log and in a trice his assailant had bound and gagged him with the aid of some cord he carried in his pack and dragged him to one side. He sat down again coolly, wiping his hands on his shirt.

"Now my pretty white bird, come here," said the officer gently, plain lust in his eyes. But I could not for the life of me move. I prayed for death. Yolanda screamed as the man who clutched at her lifted her bodily and carried her

into the house. The officer rose deliberately and came to me. I felt his breath on my face.

"So," he muttered and reached for one of my wrists. "So—you defy me! I like spirit, I must confess. But you will come with me. You will know the glory of a Japanese soldier's love—a Japanese soldier who is worth all your senile, incompetent, polo playing and pig-sticking generals and brigadiers whose only passion in life is what you English call Red Tape. You will one day be able to tell your friends—if you ever get away from Malaya—of the signal honour afforded to you. Come."

He suddenly twisted my arm so that I involuntarily screamed with the agony of it. Then he pushed me, doubled up, before him into the house, the laughter of his men following us. I prayed again for death. I prayed for forgiveness for all I had done wrong in my life. I could not believe that God would forsake me.

But He did.

## CHAPTER XXIX

OUR captors were still drinking when darkness fell. I wondered when and how we were going to escape. Would they keep us with them anyway ? It seemed doubtful—if they were on some special mission. They might even kill us, I reflected. The answer came something in the form of an anti climax.

Suddenly, from the direction of the *padang*, came the roar of Peter's plane and the ripping sound of automatic fire. The entire party, under the officer, rushed from the house towards the *padang*. I remember thinking someone must have thanked their lucky stars on seeing the plane—must have thanked God for this means of deliverance. There was the sound of more shots, then the plane obviously took off.

Perhaps because I was a woman, or perhaps because of what had occurred, the officer had not left me bound firmly. He may have considered my body and spirit too broken for me to think of escape. It had been—but only for a while. Numb with the horror of his beastliness I had only wanted to die. But now, with the house suddenly quiet and with the thought of Peter lying out on the verandah I wanted to live. What had they done with Yolanda ? But it was no time for speculation. By frantic wriggling and straining at the cords on my wrists I at last managed to free my hands. I took one last look round the room to see if there was anything we would find useful and then with trembling haste went out onto the verandah and freed Peter, terrified lest our captors return before we got away.

Peter stretched his cramped body and said urgently : "We'll use your car, Susan. There's every chance we can reach Singapore or Malacca. We may be lucky enough there to pick up sleeping space across to Rangoon or Calcutta."

But the enemy had obviously thought of the possibility of our escaping. The petrol tank of the car had been gashed open and the carburettor removed.

"Well, there's nothing for it but to flat foot it," said Peter ruefully. "Where's Yolanda?"

I shook my head in the dark.

"She must be still in the house, I suppose."

But a rapid search proved that she wasn't. Perhaps the extraordinary fascination her childish body had had for her admirer had been too much for him and he had rushed her off with him at the risk of encumbering the party. Perhaps his superior had not noticed her in the dark. Whatever had happened we could not wait. I felt that we were being cowardly, leaving her to her fate, but Peter snapped, "It's better that at least two of us get away Susan, rather than all three take what's coming at the hands of those swine! I'll not have you chancing whatever horrors they seem to delight in. When I think of Hong Kong I feel like murder."

My heart felt cold. He had not seen me pushed into the house. He must have been unconscious for a long time. We made our way rapidly down the pathway, after having swiftly provided ourselves with two torches from Paul's and my cupboards and a few tins of food.

There was no moon but we made rapid progress till suddenly we heard the sound of running footsteps behind us. Peter pushed me into the shrubbery at the side of the pathway. The footsteps drew level. We could hear the laboured, panting sound of breathing. Apparently only one man had thought it worth while to follow us. And then I realised that he couldn't have been following us for we might have taken any of several routes for all he had known. My thought was corroborated next second by the sound of other footsteps and then the crack of a rifle. But it was too dark for the pursuer of the first runner, whoever it was. The fugitive disappeared into the night and the sound of his footsteps became faint.

We crouched in the undergrowth for some minutes to make sure that the rifleman was not coming on down the road. We heard him mutter something after a long interval and then the sound of his feet scrunching on the pathway away from us.

"Come on, we must get moving," muttered Peter and we resumed our way.

"Singapore's nearly three hundred miles away, Peter!" I moaned when we had been walking for some time. My light shoes had already fallen from my feet, torn to shreds, and my bare feet were sore.

"We'll probably get a lift on the way," Peter returned. "Or if we make for Malacca which is closer there's just a chance we'll be able to get off shore."

But we never had a chance of reaching Singapore. We had barely reached the main road in fact before the main enemy forces from Kuantan thundered along it, behind their far flung parties of shock troops, cutting us off from any further advance in that direction. We detoured and made for the coast near Malacca, staggering painfully through the jungle and swamp, existing on the charity of natives in the *kampongs*. We never saw the tragedy of the fall of Singapore, the shattering of the hopes of the populace and the army when the enemy landed on the north west corner of the island in strength. We never saw the stacks of abandoned material in the streets and the lines of empty cars which, eye-witnesses later told us, were left along the front of Keppel Harbour, the West Coast Road and the Bukit Timah Road. But we witnessed our share of the horrors of that brief part of the war. When we reached Malacca we saw a bomb fall amongst a group of about sixty Chinese who were receiving a rice ration. Nobody would approach the ghastly moaning masses of dead and wounded till some of the Local Defence Corps arrived. And all they could do, with white strained faces, was to throw blankets over the mangled bodies and carry them away, making for the nearest bar for neat whisky to restore their shattered nerves afterwards.

We heard the sound of women and children screaming when the town was shelled. No one who was not there can ever visualise the horror of that sound, the awful pity it inspired in one. We saw a reckless officer and his wife on the verandah of their bungalow, scorning to take shelter. A fragment of shell suddenly ripped the officer almost in two at his waist, his wife suddenly crumpling up with her head and face blown to a horrible mangled pulp.

We were told of how celluloid dolls were dropped by the enemy. How, when children picked the dolls up, they exploded. Refugees like us gave vivid accounts of their share of the terrors of this most modern, most sudden phase of the war. They told of how leaflets had been dropped telling all Indians that the Japanese meant them no harm and if they would wear white clothes and stand out in the open together, where they could be seen, they would not be bombed. Some of the first bombs dropped fell amongst these trusting souls.

Then suddenly the screaming, roaring nightmare seemed to end in quiet one night as Peter bargained with a Malay fisherman for a sampan. We had picked up two other groups, one of three and one of four Europeans, and these were to accompany us. We stood and trembled in the dark while Peter talked. The roar of the battle was behind us and the shouts and cries of the refugees echoed on the night air. It seemed as if safety was in sight at last.

"Come on, bundle in, you folks," said Peter at length, "before we get overrun by some other of these poor frantic devils. It's only about fifty miles across the Straits at this point. We should make Sumatra by ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Let's name the boat the *Lucky Susan*—we deserve some luck!"

His hand felt for mine in the dark and squeezed it.

But it took us three days to reach Sumatra. At dawn of that first day a storm sprang up and drove us, drenched and naked but for a few shreds of clothing that had not been torn from us by the waves and rocks and wind, the sampan a mass of wreckage, onto one of the small islands of the Archipelago. I was all but drowned in those few dreadful moments when it seemed that we had escaped the enemy only to perish at the hands of the elements. But it was Peter who clutched me by the hair and dragged me on to the rocky shore.

Here, on the island, we waited, naked, for the sun to come up and dry us and our totally inadequate remnants of clothes, the three women camping behind one large rock and group of palms and the men behind another. But it is remarkable what common suffering can do to the human mind, how conventionality and prudery and even the shame we experience at the possession of a body, are wafted to the wind. At the end of the first twelve hours we forgot our camps and the shreds of clothing that were so useless to us and which only seemed to emphasise our nakedness, and were all talking together, unashamed.

We spent that day and the next on the island, living on the flesh and water of green coconuts. We saw many a ship and boat in the distance, making for Sumatra and Java, obviously with loads of troops and refugees. They either could not or would not see the smoke signal we sent up with the aid of green foliage and a box of precious matches one of the party had had the foresight to wrap in his oilskin tobacco pouch. But perhaps they were too busy looking for and dealing with enemy planes, some of which were at times visible to us as tiny specks. Strangely enough perhaps, no enemy planes passed over us, drawn by our signals. They, too, must have been busy—about their vindictive, murderous business. At night a dull red glow illuminated the skyline in the direction of the mainland and Singapore.

But at last two overloaded tramp steamers, one with a gaping hole in its bows, passed close in to us, sighted us and picked us up, the crew of the boat lending us their jackets to wrap round us.

We were landed on the east coast and had to trek across the Sumatra swamps and jungle for days, using any means of conveyance we possibly could, from the bullock carts of friendly villagers to old lorries, the cars of Dutch planters and our own sore feet.

And so we limped into Belawan where both steamers were declared temporarily hors de combat. Here, with difficulty, Peter managed to arrange sleeping space for me to Calcutta on another packed ship, using as a bribe, in this exodus that claimed little or no regular payment for passages, part of the thousand dollars I had brought with me.

"Aren't you coming darling?" I asked him and my heart sank when he shook his head.

"No. There's work to be done back there. They need every pilot they can get hold of. I should never have stayed with you all this while, Susan. Don't stay in Calcutta when you reach it. Go to 32 Park Street, where mother is, and put up with her till she's ready to move to Bombay or Delhi—I don't know where she's making for but I suppose it will be Bombay. You will be safer in Bombay, both of you."

Our farewell was strangely matter of fact after the unreal, ghastly days we had gone through. Somehow nothing seemed worth while and there appeared to be no hope for the future, no scrap of blue in the grey oppressive sky. One felt that the British Empire would never recover, that it had been dealt a mortal blow, that soon these yellow savages would be overrunning India, spreading terror and bestiality everywhere.

As I waved to Peter from the crowded steamer I felt I was leaving my very life behind. Even when we were bombed and machine gunned as we clung to the east coast of Sumatra and then sailed south of the Nicobar Islands I felt indifferent to the imminence of death. And I was certain I would never see Peter again.

At 32, Park Street in Calcutta I found that Mrs. Chambers had left a week previously to go to Delhi. No one knew her new address—not even the Post Office where she had obviously not thought of notifying her change of address. In a semi dreamlike state I crossed India from Calcutta to Bombay.

There I had the mortification of finding, when I reached my hotel, that my money had been stolen from my bag. I managed to find the Bombay branch of the bank I had used in Malaya. But I was told that no records of the bank's transactions had been saved. The books had been sunk along with the man who had tried to bring them away. They were sorry, they could not advance me anything.

The fact brought me back to cold, stark reality. I was no longer indifferent. It is one thing to die suddenly and another to starve. I was in a vast country strange to me but for the impressions I had gained during one or two brief visits Paul and I had paid it on holiday, and I had less than fifty rupees to my name. So I turned my back on the hotel and found a cheap boarding house.

With the last of my fifty rupees gone I knew that I faced life in all its ugliness—friendlessness, starvation, perhaps even, in desperation, the horror of living on the streets—if one could do that in India. And then, with that pall of grey sky ahead of me, I decided to do the impossible, to take a gamble with life, challenge it. I would sell my diamond engagement ring, take an expensive flat, have dinner at the Taj Mahal Hotel and see whether Fate would send me anything unusual, anything comforting. I do not quite remember what was exactly in my mind. I was hungry and miserable. But I felt it was a chance. Perhaps I would meet someone who would want to help me without making me feel embarrassed. Perhaps some decent principled man would fall in love with me and pay my bills without expecting any return—till I found Peter again. I don't know what I thought or hoped for. My mind was in a haze. My ring only fetched two hundred rupees, the sum I had to pay in advance for the flat.

But I sat down coolly in the air conditioned dining and ballroom of the Taj and ordered a dinner as costly as if I were a millionairess. I had already made up my mind what I was going to do if my vague experiment did not bear fruit, if I was humiliated and perhaps apprehended by the police for not paying my bill. I would jump into the sea and end it all. If everything went smoothly—well, I had a lovely furnished flat to give as an address—an address that I would not feel ashamed of. I could invite friends there as I made them—and if they were influential friends *something* was bound to turn up before my next month's rent fell due.

And then I saw the group of three men at a table not far away. They seemed interested in me. One seemed to be a cripple, a fact borne out a little later; one was stout and jovial looking, in spite of his peculiar teeth; and the third looked cynical and worldly, his handsome face lean and hard, a scar on his head. At last the stout man said something to his companions and came over to me.

"Do you mind if my friends and I join you?" he asked. "We're confoundedly lonely and you looked as if you were suffering from the same disease too! We'll promise to behave!"

"No," I said, "I don't mind at all. Do sit down, all of you. Yes, I must confess I am lonely too. Bombay can be quite frightening under certain conditions."

And that was how I came to meet the three strange men who influenced my life to so great a degree. John Traill, whom I think I later loved—or pitied, I don't know which. But they say pity is akin to love. Under his twisted, bitter exterior he had a soul. Then Mark Sheridan, bitter cynic who frightened me at first and later loved me to such an extent that I could not bear to hurt him by refusing to marry him or by telling him of the child I was going to have—the child of a ruthless, lustful Japanese. Gerald Portland—stout and genial and yet with something about him that I could never quite fathom, something deep and utterly puzzling.

When Peter's mother wired me from Delhi that he had been killed in action I felt the bottom had dropped out of my world. I had been dreaming and building the future on the ecstatically happy foundation of a few perfect days we had together in Fyzabad when I had met him there while visiting that town with John Traill in search of my grandparents' house.

I could not imagine Peter dead, his crisp curly hair probably bloodstained and pitiful. For a while I felt once more that I would rather be dead than alive. But then came the forlorn hope that there might be some mistake in the official report sent to Mrs. Chambers, that maybe I would see Peter again some day. It was a hope that buoyed me up through the weeks that followed—coupled with the friendship and kindness of my friends, Mark Sheridan and Gerald Portland. John Traill had disappeared.

And then Mark asked me to marry him. I liked him very much. He had been terribly good to me in those early uncertain days in Bombay. At the bottom of my heart nagged the sensible answer to my threadbare hope about Peter—"Don't be a fool! You'll never see him again. He's dead. It's weeks since the report. If it had been a mistake you would have heard by now."

I told Mark I would marry him in six months if Peter were not alive and did not come back to me.

Then came the horror of the discovery that I was going to have my second child. The terror and utter paralysing shame and disgust of that day in Malaya, when God thought fit to send a savage to exact a grim sort of penance for my love sin with Peter, swept afresh into my mind. I thought of Mark and how he would feel. I could not bear to tell him what had happened. Besides which, he had once hinted

to me the reason for his cynicism and the criminally hurtful thoughts he had borne towards all women at the time he had first met me. There was only one thing to do, one course to follow. Mark must not know about this child.

I wrote to Mrs. York, that delightful friend I had made in Fyzabad with John. I planned to spend my time with her a little later on. When she arrived and I told her my secret she was terribly distressed. We had left Gerald and Mark in the drawing room.

"Have you seen a doctor?" she asked and I shook my head.

"Then you're a fool!" said Mrs. York firmly. "They can do anything these days."

But the thought of going to a doctor and asking for an artificial abortion sickened and terrified me.

"Somehow—somehow I daren't, Vera."

"But you must. It would be too terrible, too gruesome, for you to have this child. You would want to murder it every time you looked at it."

But I insisted that I would see the birth of the child through and that we could possibly put it in an orphanage or home.

Came that terrible day on a hill in Lonavla when Gerald and Mark (who were with us on holiday at the former's suggestion and at his delightful house Blue Dell) found what turned out to be the pathetic remains of poor John Traill. The way Gerald broke the news shocked me dreadfully. My body and nerves on edge because of the child I bore, I fainted—and feared the men had learned my secret. But they hadn't—or so I felt.

There followed Mark's strangeness for days after that, his preoccupied air, his readiness to lose his temper on the slightest pretext. He seemed to suspect something and yet appeared afraid to come into the open. Perhaps he had heard malicious rumours from Fyzabad about John and I and our foolish joke of pretending to be Mr. and Mrs. Mannerling—a joke furthered by the fact that Mr. York himself made the mistake of supposing that we were a honeymooning couple in search of my grand parents' house. Perhaps Mark felt that anything he had heard was verified by the fact that John had left me everything he possessed, including his bungalow in Lonavla—Bright Nook—and all rights in his current novels.

Whatever it was, there came a time at length when I felt I could not hope to hide my secret from him any longer. I

told him I wanted six months' leave. He seemed surprised but agreed that I have it.

Mrs. York and I left for Fyzabad. Our plan was that we should go up to the Murree Hills near Rawalpindi where she and her husband owned a bungalow, as Mark or Gerald might any day take it into their heads to call and see me. It was useless going to Bright Nook of course. That was too accessible. I don't quite know how to explain or make clear my decision. You, dear reader, unfaced by any such problem in your life, would probably be able to offer a much simpler course of action. I couldn't think of one. It seemed to me I must try and keep Mark happy, that we should, if Peter indeed never entered my life again, try and snatch some small degree of happiness from life together.

I used to send my letters for Mark to Mr. York in Fyzabad. From there he would post them to Mark, making it seem as if I was still in Fyzabad. We had already planned what story to tell if Mark or Gerald did visit Fyzabad. Dear Mr. and Mrs. York! I shall never forget them—their sympathy and their help—their understanding and affection.

The months slipped by in the glorious climate of Murree. The hills always seem to have something so clean about them. My time drew near. Yolanda and Vera York were my constant companions. We would go for long gentle walks down the hillside paths. The beauty of the scenery, the flowers and the fresh smell of pine needles that always seemed to fill the warm drowsy air almost made me forget my coming ordeal and the problem of what to do with the child and how I would feel towards it—full of hate and resentment because of its origin or pitying and loving because it was so helpless, so blameless, part of me, part of my blood and flesh, having taken its form and life within my body.

One evening as the sun was setting we returned from our walk trudging slowly up the peaceful hill to the bungalow where it nestled amongst the pines.

Suddenly, like a ghost from nowhere, Mark confronted me as I reached the top of the pathway. He was dirty and dishevelled and unshaven. His eyes were bloodshot and insane as they glared at my figure and then into my eyes. His voice was a crazy shout as he accused me of bearing John Traill's child. With contempt lashing from his lips and murder in his eyes he ripped my blouse open before the paralysed Mrs. York could stop him.

"I thought I'd seen the last of prostitutes," he snarled, "when my wife....."

But at that moment Vera found her voice and the power of her limbs. She shouted at him and grasped his arm in

her strong hands. He wrenched himself free and struck out at her. His whirling fists missed her and I felt sudden dull shocks of pain in my breast and face as they hit me. I tottered wildly on the edge of the pathway where it dropped away. I heard Mark suddenly shout "Susan!" in a broken, pleading kind of voice. I heard Yolanda scream from the bottom of the slope. And then I fell and everything went black.

## CHAPTER XXX

AND so did God, or whatever power it is that governs our lives, ask me to pay a further contribution towards the settlement of my account. When I regained consciousness I found I had been in bed forty-eight hours and had almost died. Mercifully the doctor and Vera had not been able to save the child. There was no sign of Mark. Somehow I didn't care. I did not want to see him. Not that I felt any resentment towards him. But I just felt indifferent about him, lifeless, without much interest in anything.

After a week the doctor stopped coming and Vera and Yolanda were able to nurse me back to health.

"Where's Mark?" I asked one bright morning with the sun streaming in at the window and the birds busy with their songs in the trees outside.

Vera did not answer for some time, but busied herself with some bed sheets and pillow cases in a corner of the room. It was not till she had placed them inside a cupboard that she spoke.

"Well, I suppose you're strong enough to hear the news. He was picked up with his neck broken at the bottom of one of the valleys below the motor road, about ten miles from Murree. The wreckage of the car was around him. Apparently he had taken the taxi he had come up in and driven off himself, without the driver. He left some papers for you. Your friends certainly have a grim way of going out of your life, dear."

She left the room and was back after a few moments with a scribbled note from Mark and a pile of neatly written manuscript.

"Susan, I am going to kill myself," ran the note, "if I can pluck up the nerve. People like me shouldn't remain alive. We're a menace to society and to the happiness of sweet creatures like you. I could never make you happy and I'm afraid I just couldn't be happy again myself—ever. Please

forgive me for the weak way I'm taking out. Perhaps Traill felt the same about his life, poor chap. I know now how bitterly sick one *can* feel about one's self and the grey future. Please don't refuse to take what I have left you in my will. Like Traill I was a wanderer without dependents. Like him, I'd feel happier in the hereafter—if there is a hereafter—if you helped yourself through life with all I have. It's yours, including the firm itself. I know you are capable of running it and making more of a success of it than I. I shall be glad to die in my beloved hills, for in them I have had some of my greatest happiness. I see the oaks are just putting on their autumn leaves. They look swell. The manuscript is a short diary of my useless life as connected with you. You may like to read it. I finished it last night."

It seemed strange to me that I should pay on the one hand with such bitterness of experience and yet on the other receive so generously of the means of sustenance. With the bequeathments of John and Mark I was left comfortably off, independent of the world or my fellows. And yet but a few short months ago I had been destitute. Life is a funny thing.

"He has left me all he has, Vera," I said softly as I laid Mark's note down. "Poor Mark, he didn't know what he was doing. I'm sure of that. And I'm sure we will find the answer in his manuscript somewhere."

"Like Mr. Traill he was good underneath," sniffed Vera. "I can't say I liked him as much. But I liked him. How terrible it is for God to let men feel as insane as he must have felt that day. Seems all wrong to me somehow."

I did not read Mark's manuscript at once. I don't know what kept putting me off exactly. It was nothing in particular I suppose. I told myself I'd read it when I got back to Bombay. It lay at the bottom of one of my suit-cases. Here again Fate or God or just plain Nature was asking me to pay a further price. For if I had read the manuscript in Murree, Gerald Portland would never have influenced my life as he did. If Vera had come back with me to Bombay instead of returning to Fyzabad, things might have been very different too.

When he found Mark had died and left me his advertising firm Gerald cheerfully pooh poohed the idea that I could look after it.

"You can't do it alone, Susan," he said. "It'll be much too much of a strain for you."

"Nonsense, Gerald! You don't know what I'm capable of."

He took my hands in his somewhat damp ones and his voice was very kind.

"Now look here, I've got a proposition to make. Let me help you with it. I won't charge you a sou! You look after the technical side—I know nothing about drawing or advertisements or anything like that—and I'll manage the administrative side. You'll probably find your accounts staff swindling you right and left if you don't have some close supervision—close and expert."

I thought for some moments. There was a lot in what he said. I did not understand accounts. And it would be a great help if he were in the firm with me, even if only for a couple of hours a day to supervise that department.

"Think it over," he urged. "And I'm sure you'll agree."

"But your own work, Gerald! I couldn't possibly impose on you like that."

"Tut, tut, child! Impose on me! Why, I'm sadly under-worked as it is. I want something extra to do. Time hangs heavily on my hands."

He looked so large and comfortable, so solidly capable, that I did not argue further.

"In that case I'd love to have your help," I said.

He used to drive me home each evening saying there wasn't any sense in my driving Mark's small Austin when we were both going to the same office. We got so used to each other's company that it seemed odd if anything prevented that evening drive home together. I felt about him as I might have felt about an uncle or a father. But one evening he startled me by saying, "Susan dear—don't laugh at me but do you think you could ever care for me?"

I felt terribly sorry for him in that moment. The question he asked was pathetic. He could not have been older than about thirty-six but he looked fifty with his poor fat body and partially bald head. And I don't know how he dreamt I could ever care for him. Anyone less attractive from that point of view than Gerald I did not know. He seemed to perspire continually and somehow his teeth looked so queer. I was horribly embarrassed at his question and quite unable to answer for a few moments.

We were sitting on one of the benches in the Hanging Gardens on Malabar Hill. Dusk was falling over the blacked out city of Bombay. Dull gnome-like lights sped along Marine Drive like so many glow-worms. The grey bulk of the buildings along the sea front was relieved by their faintly lit windows, which made a chequered design of

sombre light and shadow. At last I found the courage to reply to Gerald's question.

"Gerald—dear friend—I'm so utterly sorry. I find this so hard to say. I don't love you and I must be honest enough to say I never could. I think you're one of the swellest friends any girl ever had but—oh, Gerald, do understand, please!"

I saw he was looking out across the water to the glowing lights below. He was quiet for some seconds. Then he said, forcing a laugh: "Of course I understand, Susan. I understand that it was a bit idiotic for me to suggest any such thing. Forgive me. But I've cared for you for a long time. No hard feeling?"

I squeezed his arm.

"No hard feelings at all. You honoured me, Gerald dear, by asking me. And you weren't idiotic."

He laughed again, more naturally this time.

"Any man who proposes to a woman who doesn't love him must be idiotic in her sight."

"Don't talk rot!" I retorted. But I knew he spoke the truth in essence. We are rather inclined to laugh at or pity such man. And in such cases pity is almost as bad as laughter.

Next evening Gerald couldn't drive me home. He sent a note by a *chaprassi* saying he was not feeling too well but would see me on the morrow. He sent his big blue Buick with his driver though, as he had always done when he couldn't come himself.

That night I woke with a start, my senses wildly alert, instinct warning me of danger. I had not heard a sound but my heart was in my mouth. I heard the clock in the Rajabai Clock Tower on the Oval strike twelve. Then my blood froze as something rustled at the head of my bed and a hand closed swiftly over my mouth while a rope slid round my ankles. I struggled wildly, trying desperately to scream, but my assailants were too powerful. In a few seconds I was bound, gagged and blindfolded and then lifted bodily by feet and arm-pits and carried outside. I remember thinking hazily that my assailants must have used a rope ladder to reach the balcony, for my flat was on the second floor.

I felt myself sinking in the lift and then thrown onto the seat of a car. The car moved forward. I don't know how long we drove. When we stopped again I was lifted out and carried up what was obviously a short flight of steps and into another lift. All this time there was not a word from the

man who carried me. I was laid fairly gently on a bed and after a few minutes I felt a sudden prick in my arm and a sense of drowsiness.

When I came to, my impressions were hazy and clouded and confused. I did not know where I was or how I had got there. The memory of the two men in the night seemed but a dreadful dream. I felt dull and miserable and, suddenly, strangely resigned to the fact that something incredibly horrible and real despite its apparent unreality was happening to me.

The room I was in was barely furnished, with a cupboard, dressing table and a chair. There was no window. A small door led to what I supposed was a lavatory. Another was obviously the main means of entrance and egress. I noticed hazily that over it on the plaster was a peculiarly shaped stain made by oil or some such liquid. It was shaped something like a bat with outspread wings. My head throbbed as I looked uncomprehendingly around. My right arm pained me.

Then the main door opened and a thin wizened man entered. He smiled at me.

"You have been very ill," he said in a dry sort of voice. "Show me your arm." He coughed. "This will improve your condition."

Again I felt the prick in my arm and again I gradually lost consciousness. After that my existence seemed to be made up of hazy incredible dreams in which a huge masked figure predominated, now staring down at my naked body for minutes on end, now breathing heavily by my side like an animal. In the numbness of my brain I knew that I was being used to satisfy the lust of some crazed human, that he came again and again to that bare room to torture my unfeeling body.

And then, as if I had woken from a nightmare, I found myself one night walking near the Gateway of India. My mind was clear. I could smell the sea. The dim lighting of the Taj Mahal Hotel was to my right. A half moon shone on the sea. I looked down at my clothes. They were strange to me. I had a strange black handbag which contained a key and some small change. My right arm was sore. A sailor passing said: "Hullo, dearie!"

I made my way slowly to where the taxis stood near Green's Hotel, got into one, and gave the address of my flat. I let myself in and looked unbelievably round the rooms. It seemed as if I had not been away from them. They were the same—exactly the same. I undressed and, switching on

the fan, sank into my bed. I heard the clock in the clock tower strike ten.

When I awoke Yolanda was looking down on me with a smile on her dusky face but a touch of reproach was in her voice when she spoke.

"Madam has had a good holiday? Madam might have taken me too."

I sat up in bed. It was definitely a nightmare from which I had wakened.

"How long have I been away, Yolanda?" I asked. She gazed at me in puzzlement.

"How long? Four days, madam. Don't you know that? You told me in your letter you were going for four day's holiday."

"Letter? What letter?"

She left the room and was soon back with a note in my hand writing. What she said was true. I had written the letter. But when? Or had someone else written it? The writing was definitely mine. I felt a little dazed. But in the background of my mind persisted the swirling ugliness of a dreadful dream which included a shadowy monster as its focal point of horror. Yolanda was staring at me as if I was crazy.

"You look thinner, madam," she said at last. "You better not leave again without me. I know how to look after you properly. And I don't know where or why you get these clothes. Awful old things."

She whisked my clothes into the bathroom and then insisted that she get me a nice hot bath ready with plenty of bath salts. I gratefully sank into the brimming tub and stretched my aching limbs. I glanced absently at my right arm as I soaped myself. There seemed to be a slight patch of rash above the elbow, tiny red pin points. The nightmare I had experienced became clearer in my mind. It had happened in reality.

I reached the office with my mind still in a half numb state. I thought the staff looked strangely at me as I passed through the studio and main office to my room. Gerald Portland rose as I entered.

"Why, Susan—it's you! I hope you've had a good holiday? Where did you go? Bright Nook? Lonavla must be looking wonderful. I was sorry you asked me not to come up, I can tell you! What was wrong? Thinking out all this crazy stuff of yours?"

Something told me it was useless to try and puzzle out the mystery, useless to deny that I had also written Gerald a letter. But his next words made my mind function with crystal clearness. Truly a nightmare had enveloped me—a nightmare of reality. His eyes seemed somewhat unsteady as he spoke.

"Why on earth you've been crazy enough to give me this firm and Bright Nook and even the income from Trail's novels I don't know! What's wrong with you, Susan?"

"Wrong with me?" I murmured, taking in his fat features. "Given you my firm?"

He nodded.

"Yes. I appreciate it, believe me. But I can't help thinking you made a mistake in doing it. Tired of it all or something?"

"Am I crazy, Gerald, or are you?"

His eyebrows lifted in amazement.

"Good lord! We seem to be working in the dark somehow—and talking at cross purposes! You wrote to me and to your lawyers arranging for the transfer of all your property to me. It's all been settled. I have the documents here if you'd care to see them."

I looked at the documents. What he said was true. There was no mistake about it. I often wonder, now that I know the truth of it all, what prompts that strange sense of destruction in many male minds when they have satiated their sexual desires with some object that takes their fancy. It is the force which urges the pervert to murder the child he brutally ravages, the neurotic to kill himself after abandoning himself to some frantic passage of passion. The code of live and let live seems to become anathema to them. Some indescribable fear haunts them—fear of discovery. Now that I have read the stories of Mark Sheridan and Gerald himself I think I understand the latter's mind. But I didn't then.

"Gerald," I said dully, "I don't understand this at all. I didn't know I wrote all this. You've got to give it back—my firm, my house—everything." I laughed nervously. "I must have taken leave of my senses. You don't need it anyway. You already have so much."

I expected him to laugh in his old cheerful way and say: "Of course, my dear, of course! Can't imagine what came into you. Must have been a nervous breakdown or something."

But nothing of the sort happened. He looked down at the blotting paper on his desk. His face was serious.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," he said coldly.

"Impossible, Gerald?" His words were like an icy dagger through my body. He nodded.

"Yes, I'm sorry. You can question the whole thing in a court of law of course, if you want to."

"But Gerald, you're my friend. You once even offered me a good job! Why, you've got millions!"

"I'm sorry," he repeated. "You certainly were foolish when you signed everything away. But now you've done it I'm afraid you'll have to put up with it."

"Then what about your giving me a job? I can still work in the studio for you. You'll need a good artist."

"I won't. There's no room for you here. I'm sorry. And I'm busy too. Good morning, Susan. I'm afraid we can't meet again. If you want a job seriously, why not go and see Madame Zhukov."

I stared at him in silence, in amazement. This could not be real! The nightmare surely persisted. But it *was* real. There was Saxena, the Production Manager, putting his head through the door, and there were all the smiling faces on the calendars around the walls, and there on the desk before Gerald was Mark's grinning glass Mephistopheles paper weight. I got up slowly and walked from the room, from the office, out into the sunlight and the realistic sound of the traffic passing up and down Hornby Road.

## CHAPTER XXXI

SEE Madame Zhukov ! Gerald Portland's words dinned in my mind as I entered the Blue Heaven. Why had he changed as he had ? I couldn't understand it. I couldn't understand why I did go and see Madame Zhukov. If it wasn't that I had seen so little of her I probably would never have gone near her again. I had felt a little sorry for her when she had come to our table at the Taj Mahal Hotel. Now she obviously felt sorry for me. She took my hands in hers and gazed understandingly into my face, making little clucking noises as I asked her if she could give me any work to do.

" You joke ? " she smiled at last. " You so rich with the firm our Mr. Sheridan give to you. You want to work ? Oh yes, it is for the war effort you make it, no ? "

I shook my head. I don't know why I had allowed myself to ask for a job in anything to do with Gerald Portland. Maybe I still had a faint hope he was playing some horrible sort of joke on me. Or maybe I hoped he would change his mind, shake off this amazing spasm of ruthless greed that seemed to have him in its grip. Or perhaps I forgot for a moment that I had at least two real friends in Fyzabad—Mr. and Mrs. York. I had made no other friends, perhaps strangely enough. John Traill and Mark and Gerald Portland seemed to have occupied most of my time and thoughts where friends were concerned. But Madame Zhukov was again shaking her head sympathetically and making strange sounds with her teeth and tongue. Her little eyes blinked as she let go my hand.

" Of course, my dear," she said at last. " You can work here. Not for me to ask any more questions. You want to work here, you work here. You can dance and maybe wait at some of the tables. If you come with me I show you your room. Unless, of course, you like to stay on in your flat ? But we prefer our girls to live on the premises. It is more convenient so."

In a daze, my head aching and my body feeling peculiarly lifeless, I followed her up some steps, along a passage, another passage and a few more steps. The passages contained doors opening out into them from what were obviously rooms. Madame Zhukov at last threw open one of these doors and turned to me with a smile, ushering me in.

"There you are, dear—your room. I'm sure you will like it so much."

I walked in dully and looked around. And even as my eyes alighted on the peculiarly shaped stain over the door that opened into the passage, I heard Madame Zhukov gasp slightly. She grasped my arm roughly and pushed me outside again, almost stammering in explanation: "The wrong room, dear. I'm so sorry. That one belongs to—to Betty Marsh. She is so sweet."

But I was hardly listening to her. Some dull, hazy memory was nagging at my aching brain. What was it? Something about that room, that stain. Where had I seen it before? It came back to me gradually as I walked along. It had been, of course, in the room that had featured in my nightmare. But I knew now it had not been a nightmare. A sudden fear of this stocky, garish looking woman by my side filled me. Her confusion in the room condemned her as having been connected with these ghastly memories of mine. Who then had been the masked stranger who had loomed so ruthlessly in my muddled thoughts? The answer appeared to be so obvious. Linked with his sudden desire to rob me of everything and sever all connections with me except those that might occur in the ordinary course of events at the Blue Heaven, everything pointed to Gerald Portland. His queer uneasiness in the office. His refusal to even have me work there for him. Everything pointed to a nature satiated and sick with the thought of the object of his unbridled passion. Or was I taking a foolishly melodramatic view of the whole thing? Was I not assuming too much—in a "penny dreadful" kind of way?

"Ah—here it is—the right room!" Madame Zhukov's voice broke into my thoughts. The sound of her voice decided me.

"I'm sorry," I said dully. "I'm not staying here. I don't want any job here anyway. I've changed my mind."

There was a little silence as we stopped dead at the door and looked at each other. I'm sure there must have been fear in my eyes. In hers there was a mixture of interrogation and surprise. At length she shrugged her shoulders.

"As you like, my dear. But good jobs go here. And sometimes work is hard to get." She leered significantly. "But as you like."

She repeated the last three words many times as we retraced our steps towards the dining room of the restaurant. I walked out into the fresh salt laden air with a sense of extreme uncleanliness. A breeze was blowing in from the white topped waves. A handful of gulls fluttered squawking above some rocks. Mingling with that sense of uncleanliness was one of impotency. What could I do about it all? What could I do to Gerald Portland? Report him? Make a scene in front of some inscrutable Police Inspector who would look at me with regret and say: "Can you prove this very grave charge, Mrs. Mannering?"

The answer to my mental tumult seemed to come like a comforting ray of warmth in cold, bleak surroundings. Mr. and Mrs. York—dear Malcolm and Vera—they would help me. The former might even be able to give me some sound advice about fighting this seemingly fantastic and yet real claim of Gerald Portland's to my house and to the firm Mark had left me. Fortunately I had a little money put by in the Imperial Bank of India. I felt sure they would not mind my visiting them again and explaining everything, telling them how I was left practically at the end of my resources, how I felt too ill to struggle any more at the moment. Then I could make a fresh start with my drawing and painting. There might even be the chance of a good position on the staff of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*.

My mind made up, I packed with the help of Yolanda and we caught the afternoon train next day. I did not think to wire my arrival.

At Fyzabad there awaited me what I thought must be the final horrible shock in the unreal, impossibly beastly turn my life had taken. There was a stranger living in the Yorks' house. He was fat and shiny faced, with a jolly smile and a fringe of grey hair round his head. But his features clouded with regret as he heard and answered my enquiry.

"Are you a friend of theirs? Then I'm very sorry to have to break this terrible news to you, my dear. Mr. and Mrs. York were both killed in an accident some nine days ago. Their car was crashed into by a runaway military lorry—one of these big three tonners—which was in the hands of a beginner. I'm sorry. Can I help at all? I'm the new man here in poor York's place. Anything I can do I will, gladly."

No. He couldn't help. It seemed that nobody could help me. A sudden sense of bitterness and anger against Fate

made me want to cry out to the trees and to the sky that I was tired of it all.....that I would like to walk again by the river down by the Happy Valley Club where poor John Traill and I had walked so long ago.....that I would like to throw myself into the water and drown. But would I drown ? I could swim. Would I not automatically begin to save myself ?

I remember pondering the question in a vague, stunned manner as I left Mr. York's successor and climbed into my tonga again. I remember how when I reached the station I considered that it would be a merciful end were I to suddenly throw myself under the wheels of the next train that came in. No one would be in time to stop me. But I felt Yolanda's small hand on my arm and the plaintive sound of her voice brought me back to earth. She had overheard the news of my friend's death. I had told her yesterday of the fact that I again had nothing left in the world.

"What we will do now, madam ?" she asked.

"I don't know, Yolanda. But I'm sure God will help us out."

Even as I said it I wondered if I was not being a trifle hypocritical. Did I believe in a God at all ?

During the journey back to Bombay I had plenty of time to wonder what, exactly, I would do next. A brief recapitulation of my position held forth a bleak prospect indeed. My net cash resources were about five hundred rupees. Bright Nook, it seemed, was lost to me. Advertising Advice and Service was in the hands of a strange criminal. My flat cost two hundred rupees a month. I had no real friends and I shrank from approaching my acquaintances for help.

I was determined not to give up my flat and seek the cheaper living of boarding houses or hostels. One lost caste somehow like that, so I felt, and had less chance of obtaining a good post. I made up my mind to see the Editor of the *Illustrated Weekly* as soon as possible after getting back to Bombay. He might have work for me—if not a permanent post then at least as a casual contributor of sketches and drawings for articles and short stories.

When I did walk into his office and state my business he shook his head regretfully.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Mannerling, about a permanent job. You see we have our full quota of artists—and, as a matter of fact, have had to cut down slightly due to war conditions. Then the commissioning of sketches and drawings for stories and articles is usually confined to people we have sort of contracted for the work. I can promise you a certain

amount of work—but it won't by any means be regular or plentiful."

"Oh thank you," I said, my heart somewhat lighter. I walked out of his air-conditioned office and out of the impressive building itself with a streak of blue showing through the grey skies that seemed to cloud every moment of my existence.

When I got home I read Mark's manuscript. It was simple and expressive. Poor Mark—how could anyone blame him for what he had thought about me? And anyway, was I any better than what he supposed me? My thoughts flew back to Malaya and that afternoon in the quiet of the bungalow with Peter's dear head close to mine. Life was a confused jumble sometimes.

One thing that stood out from the manuscript in plain, blunt words was the part Gerald Portland had played in everything to do with our lives since we had met at the Taj Mahal Hotel. I felt a little sick when I thought of the manner in which I had always been wont to regard him .....as a fatherly, cheerful soul who was very fond of me.

I was surprised by a visit from him a few days later. He was looking somewhat sheepish as I opened the door for him and motioned him to a chair.

"Susan," he said haltingly, "I've been thinking over this business of your firm and bungalow and Traill's books and I must confess I don't feel at all happy about it."

I raised my eyebrows. This was strange coming from him. I cannot describe the disgust that filled me as I took in his fat features and figure, the impotent rage that swept through me when I thought of the room in the Blue Heaven and the stranger who had made my half waking thoughts so ugly. I wanted to kill him, to scream at him that he was filth and worse. But I controlled myself—how, I do not know. It was strange that such a creature should be feeling remorse. Or was it remorse? I wanted to challenge him about the Blue Heaven but could not face the shame of letting him know that I was aware of what he had done.

"What do you want to do?" I asked. "Have you come to offer it all back to me?"

He seemed diffident, fidgetty.

"Well, I hadn't quite made up my mind about that. But if you would care to work there....."

He had obviously had a talk with Madame Zhukov. She had probably told him of my curious glance round the room she had unwittingly shown me into in the Blue Heaven—and it was clear that he wondered just how my brain functioned

while seeing the room and since. He must have been wondering what I intended doing about it if I had any real suspicions, even though he must have known I could not prove anything concrete against him. After all, anyone might have arranged for my abduction on that dreadful night.

"I'm afraid I've been a bit beastly about things," he went on. "But I think I behaved like that because I've always been selfish, from my very young days, and have been used to getting what I wanted. I've often thought I'd like to manage Sheridan's show and when you signed the lot away to me I could hardly believe my senses. If you would forgive me, maybe you would consider taking it all back."

It seemed such a pathetically, insufficient, belated manner in which to try and soothe my feelings on the subject. He must have known I suspected I had been forced to sign and write letters while under the influence of drugs. And yet he stood there and offered to reinstate me in the world, in the obvious hope that I would not parade any suspicions I might have about him. What a complex, ruthless, childish brain he must have. Suddenly I realised I did not know what to say. I could not visualise continued association with him in the future. But I needed the firm and Bright Nook.

"I can only accept what I never willingly or rationally gave you," I said slowly, "if you get out of my life altogether. I have read what Mark Sheridan wrote about you. You have done me enough vile harm and I'm sure you appreciate how I feel when I look at you. I hate and despise the thought and sight of you. I would like to kill you—if I could summon up the courage. I know I cannot drag you to any kind of justice. People would laugh at me, at my inability to substantiate the fantastic story I told. Give me back," I finished, "what is mine and don't come near me again."

He seemed relieved. There was a trace of his old smile on his face as he rose to go.

"If you'll come into my office tomorrow," he said, "everything will be ready for transfer."

How strangely indeed can the mind of man work. Only a week before, satiated with the sight of me and the knowledge of my body, he had felt the urge to press my face further into the mud by robbing me of all I had. Today—and not, I felt sure somehow, now that he was going, from fear solely—he was eager to restore everything to me. Maybe he would have restored my honour and self respect if it had been in his power to do so. Remorse is indeed a queer thing.

At the door he stopped and fidgetted with his hat. His voice was diffident.

"You say you read what Sheridan had written about me?"

"Yes. In a brief story of his life as far as it affected and was connected with mine."

He continued to look at the floor.

"That's funny. I too have written such a story—about my life. Perhaps you understood Sheridan when you read his. Maybe you would understand me a little if you read mine."

Next second he was gone. I received his manuscript next day.

## CHAPTER XXXII

And he stirred me, this blind boy clinging  
Just like a child to his crippled chum.  
But I did not cry. Oh no; a singing  
Came to my heart for a year so dumb.  
Then I knew that at three and twenty  
There is wonderful work to be done,  
Comfort and kindness and joy in plenty,  
Peace and light and love to be won.

(“Cocotte” by ROBERT W. SERVICE.)

I soon found that Gerald Portland had made no improvement in Advertising Advice and Service. Accounts of private clients were at a minimum while Government contracts had dropped off alarmingly. A large American firm which had recently opened was, I heard, getting most of this latter type of work. The war seemed to be treating us unkindly in every way.

Perhaps it was just a joke of Destiny's to have Gerald give me back my firm. Perhaps, again, I was paying good measure for the sins and shortcomings of my young life. It was hard to say. But when I realised that Advertising Advice and Service was indisputably broken, the irony of Gerald's restoration made me laugh bitterly. I managed to pay my employees their wages up to date before finally winding up the affairs of the firm and closing its books.

I can never forget the bleak, sad feeling that enveloped me as I watched the last typist walk away through the outer swing door. I turned back to the empty, echoing room and wept.

My story for the next few weeks is one of drab struggling. I will not weary my readers with it to any long drawn out extent. I sold a few sketches occasionally and managed to cultivate a fairly useful style in short household articles. Yolanda and I had to eventually move to a cheaper flat.

Although the work I did kept my mind fairly occupied I was dreadfully unhappy. Life seemed to be so perverse, so

black and utterly cruel. It would put happiness within one's grasp only to snatch it away at the last moment. It would starve one only to leave one suddenly wondering how one could cope with one's new found opulence. It would shower good things upon one only to leave one starving.

Somehow the quiet serenity of Bright Nook in the lush hills of the Western Ghats called to me. I wanted to journey up into those hills and find peace. I would have liked to have gone to Murree but it was too far away. Perhaps in Bright Nook or somewhere in the valleys or perhaps in the forest where poor John Traill ended his life I might also be able to seek oblivion.

The very calmness with which I again began to deliberate suicide set me wondering for a moment at myself. The sense of shame I had experienced at the thought of self destruction when on Fyzabad station with Yolanda deserted me. It did not seem weak or sinful any more. After all, did not thousands upon thousands of men and women indulge in little more than suicide in the defence of their countries in this war? Was the earthly fact that they fought for their homelands in senseless battle any criterion for excuse from the crime of self annihilation? Why—thousands upon thousands daily committed even murder in the name of glorious War. Conscientious objectors were spat upon by the very people who prayed to Christ for victory, prayed desperately because human wickedness and self interest and self gain could find no solution to peace for mankind.

I could find Yolanda a job and leave her the house and what little money and jewellery I had. She was the sort that would be able to look after herself. She would probably sell the house anyway and be able to live comfortably on the proceeds. I called her into my room one afternoon as she was preparing to leave.

"Yolanda, I'm going away. I'm afraid I can't help you any more. I'll find you a good position."

Her face was a study in surprise and reproach.

"Why, madam? Because you no longer rich?"

The naivete of her way of describing my former position went to my heart. I felt a beast for forsaking her. I nodded.

"That—and other things."

The reply was quick and vehement.

"But I don't want wages then. You can pay me nothing. I work only for food."

I shook my head gently.

"No, Yolanda. That's not fair and I wouldn't be happy. I know I can find you a job. Mrs. Steel was wanting an ayah and I'm sure she'll be glad to have you."

Tears sprang to her eyes.

"But madam, I don't want to leave you!" she wailed suddenly, putting a corner of her sari to her face. I patted her shoulder.

"I'm afraid you'll have to. I can't take no for an answer. You will be happy with Mrs. Steel. And don't forget she's got two lovely little children for you to look after."

There was a long silence. At last she spoke, apparently resigned to my determination.

"Very well madam. But I shall never be happy again. I shall break my heart."

I smiled at her vehemence and consoled myself with the knowledge of the resilience of youth, with the fact that Time healed the wounds of the young soonest.

I made up my mind to leave the morning after next, spending next day in arranging for the custody and trusteeship of my Will and seeing Mrs. Steel about Yolanda.

When my taxi was approaching Bori Bunder station there were sudden shouts from the road as the driver lost control round the bend that circled the tram junction. I felt my heart in my mouth as we swerved violently across and across the road in zig-zag fashion and suddenly collided with a big blue Buick. A crowd quickly gathered. Fortunately both cars had begun to lose momentum and the damage was only slight. I was amazed and not a little uncomfortable when I saw Gerald Portland climb out of the Buick and come towards the taxi. His mouth dropped open in surprise when he saw me.

"Susan!" he said. "Well I'm damned! I do hope you're not hurt?"

"No," I replied shakily. He looked questioningly at the small suitcase on the seat beside me.

"Going away?"

I nodded dumbly. His small eyes were on my face. But they were repellent no longer somehow. In them was compassion and, deep down, that pitiful expression of animal-like remorse I had seen when he had offered me back my wordly possessions.

"I've heard business was not so good," he said gently. His usually rather unpleasant voice was not so unpleasant. It was kindly. Mellower. His whole air was different to what it used to be and as I had known it. I had heard that he had lately been doing a great deal in the way of charitable work and making donations to charitable institutions. He suddenly noticed the crowd elbowing round him and the policeman pushing through towards us. A few words to the policeman and the crowd and that worthy himself dispersed.

"Where are you going?" asked Gerald. "Do let me help you. Personally, I'm on my way to Lonavla. If I can drop you somewhere along the road—say at Thana or some such place? I've been feeling peculiarly ill lately. Don't know what it is."

Something about him, his eyes, his tone, his general air, the rumours I had heard from acquaintances about his adopting a mellower, more selfless life gave me confidence. All fear of him was driven from me and, perhaps incredibly enough, all bitterness and hatred. Perhaps it was only a kind of resigned indifference that gripped me—in the knowledge that I would soon be dead. I felt it was useless living in the past at all.

"I was going to Lonavla too," I said and he smiled.

"Then let me drive you there. It's a long time since we all drove up that time for Easter. Remember? Will you come? I'll promise you faithfully I'll keep out of your way."

I remember his story as he had written it. Poor Gerald. Was he after all so much to blame for the strange unbridled kink God had put into his brain as a boy? Was he not changing now, achieving some small measure of atonement for the years and incidents that had sunk into the silent tomb of the past? I got out of the taxi and Gerald eagerly paid the man off, helping me into the front seat of the Buick and putting my suitcase into the back.

I leaned back against the seat and shut my eyes, allowing my mind to rest on the peaceful thought of the peace that awaited me in the green, quiet hills. Gerald said nothing, driving in silence, as efficiently as ever. For some reason or the other my thoughts went back some years to a trip I had made to Simla. The feeling of quiet content that I experienced now had been with me then, on the journey up and down and in Simla itself.

I had loved the deodhars, that looked like Christmas trees unadorned, the patchwork quilt of red, green and grey roofs of corrugated iron. On a dull day the clouds would rest like fleecy blankets of white wool around the tree covered valleys. Gardens were full of nasturtiums, scarlet dahlias, crysanthemums and cosmos. Rubber tyred rickshaws, with two fair complexioned Pahari coolies in front and two pushing behind, would bowl up and down the Mall Road with rather sheepish looking people inside them. The buildings used to seem all top and no bottom, tall in front, short behind where they clambered up the hillsides.

Looking down into the valley I would see the roofs of villagers' huts bright orange with the ears of maize drying in the sun preparatory to being taken from the cob.

I recalled vividly the journey down. We had left by car in the late afternoon and expected to cover the fifty odd miles to Kalka by dark. The hillsides had been blanketed with varying shades of green, from deep emerald to the yellower pastel green of young shoots and twigs. The short, stiff grass was, in places, like patches of copper. Cactus bushes there were in profusion, rearing their spinous bodies threateningly in the midst of a gentler world. In the distances, creeping up the hillsides, were tiny fairy hamlets. Hill ponies walked meekly but sturdily up the winding macadammed road, their drooping heads garnished with brightly coloured necklaces of woollen pom-poms and tinsel, their stocky drivers behind them.

As the darkness fell, fairy lights appeared on the hillsides like glow-worms, their subdued light suddenly comparing with the piercing beam of the searchlight of a trolley car as it wound its way down to Kalka. I had felt sad and disappointed when I had once more climbed into a stuffy train.

"You're very thoughtful," said Gerald at last. "Or are you asleep?"

I opened my eyes.

"No. Thinking, Gerald. Into the past. Have you ever thought how full life is of memories? It is really nothing but memories—good, bad and indifferent."

He did not answer for a while. We had reached the open country beyond Sion and were covering the ground like lightning. Soon we would be at Campoli, at the foot of the Ghats, ready for the steep climb at the end of which there was peace for me.

"Yes," said Gerald at length. "It is rather full of memories, isn't it. Sometimes I wonder why we're born at all anyway! We just go on living and remembering things and then we die. Seems sort of useless to me."

"Well, I think we all play some definite part in the scheme of things," I murmured. "However unimportant or miserable or happy that part may be."

"May be."

We drove on in silence, each of us busy with our thoughts. The flat country loomed up into the Ghats ahead, challenging us in the morning sunlight. The car began to climb.

"Gerald, aren't you climbing a bit too fast?" I asked nervously after five minutes. But he only chuckled.

"Nonsense, Susan. You don't know what my Buick can do!"

"But these lorries and things that suddenly pop round bends? You never drove so fast last time we came up, for that Easter."

"You never noticed it—you must have been too busy talking!" He paused while he took another sharp bend. "You can always hear these lorries coming a mile away."

But in the very next second his words were proved false and grim tragedy was upon us. We tore round another bend and I screamed as the red bulk of a lorry running silently out of gear loomed in front of us. There was a rending sound as Gerald bore hard over on the wheel and we grazed the red monster only to crash into and over the low wall that ran by the side of the road. My thoughts were in a chaos of flashing, darting muddle as we seemed to hang for a moment in mid air and then crashed down the forty foot drop to a stream bed below. The car rolled over, taking a complete turn. My head struck the roof.

When I opened my eyes the driver and mechanic of the lorry had not succeeded in extricating Gerald from the car. They laboured with scared faces and chattered words of excitement. I rose from the grass where they had laid me and staggered to the twisted car. Gerald was moaning. I saw his face white and drawn. Blood ran down his chin from his lips.

"Susan," he groaned, setting the blood gushing up horribly from his lungs, "Susan—tell them—not to move me. Oh God—this steering wheel—it's agony—it's cutting my chest in two!"

I almost swooned as I saw the smashed column of the steering wheel piercing deeply into the right side of his chest. How he lived I do not know.

"Gerald," I muttered, knowing that it was no good, "hold on! It's the only chance—to get you free I mean."

A thin smile came round his drawn bloody lips. His voice was fainter.

"No—tell them—stop. No chance. Glad you're not—hurt."

I told the two scared, sympathetic Indians to leave the poor tortured body alone. Gerald's head fell forward, only to jerk up with a start again. His eyes rolled helplessly as they sought my face.

"Hold my hand, Susan," he whispered, "and—forgive me. John Traill told me—dream—Susan, I'm scared—my Will—all yours—famous Portland Blues—all....."

His head fell forward again. I knew it was the end. I cursed God for not taking me too.

It seemed a sign to me that I must live. We took poor Gerald on up to Lonavia in the lorry and the padre buried him that evening, curiously enough next to John's grave. Somehow I could not bear to stay in those silent hills. I did

not know where I wanted to stay nor what I wanted to do. I went back to Bombay by the evening train, happy only because of one thing—I could tell Yolanda I would take her back.

I had little to do with the Blue Restaurants. I did not want to own them. They held too many disturbing memories for me. After a month I sold out for a sum that would keep me in comfort. And then, as I sat in the tea room at the Taj Mahal Hotel one afternoon and looked out over the harbour I was overwhelmed with a realisation of my utter selfishness. I was comfortable. I had always seemed to be bothering about money and living. It had never entered my head to join the rapidly expanding Women's War Services. Did not the avenue offer more chance of peace than any other filled with selfish motives and worries and thoughts ?

I got up and turned to leave the room. And then my heart almost stopped beating.

For, being led into the room by a brother officer, his eyes staring sightlessly before him, was Peter Chambers.

I walked swiftly over to them, my heart thumping painfully.

"Peter," I said softly, "it's Susan."

He and his friend stopped dead. His friend said : "He did not want to meet you, you understand. No man wants to burden a woman."

" You fool, Jack ! " exclaimed Peter with a touch of anger in his tone. " Why the hell didn't you tell her she must be mistaken ? " He paused for a moment, his hand gripping his friend's arm tightly. Then he continued : " No, no man wants to burden a woman. Susan, you can't start seeing me. I don't love you anyway. Jack, take me back to our digs."

" I never believed I'd see you again, Peter darling," I murmured. I did not notice the few people in the room that were staring at us.

His sightless eyes seemed to be gazing out through the window at the sea. His lips dropped at the corners. I went close to him and kissed him on the mouth.

" Peter," I whispered, " no man loved by a woman is a burden to her. I nearly killed myself the other day because I was so unhappy, so lonely. Give me back my desire to live."

We walked out through the door, the three of us.

